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WITH ONLY A SLIGHT COMPRESSION OF THE LIP, CHARLEY KENYON TOOK THE PROFFERED HAND.

OR, The Life Racket at Rattlesnake Ridge.

A CHRONICLE OF CALIFORNIA.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,
AUTHOR OF "HAPPY HARRY'S BIG FIND,"
"OKLAHOMA HI," "BILLY BLAZES," "JIM
DANDY," "KEEN CLEM," "LARIAT
LIL," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. "THE SPECIAL."

"You see," said Charley Kenyon, in the light, chatty way that newspaper men get, "I have the misery to be a mill-horse for an ungrateful public, which never greets me but with the charge to the Wandering Jew—'Go faster!' I can't enjoy even a bit of a pasear like an

ordinary tired Christian; but I must keep my eye open for pints."

"Pints!" repeated Billy Boston, the stage-driver, somewhat dubiously, as if he hadn't quite "got on" to the stranger yet. "Waal, that jest depends. Thar's some as kin give ye pints in one thing, an' some as kin give ye pints in another. Now, what might your specialty be, if it's a fair question?"

"Why, I'm an ink-slinger for the press—dirty work enough, I can tell you. You have to interview fellows that you're aching to wipe your feet on—the scum of the riffraff of the great city, that come to the top because they are bigger thieves and liars than those whose work leaves them less time to acquire such accomplishments. Then, when the very shoemakers roll up their aprons and call it a day's work, you have just begun. As for stopping, nobody knows when or where a reporter sleeps; nobody ever saw one eating except perched on a high stool before a lunch-bar."

Bill glanced out of the corner of his eye at the lively speaker, and as he changed his quid into the other cheek, quietly dropped the comment:

"H'm! I've hyeared say as they ain't slow themselves at drawin' the long bow, them fellers what ye're talkin' about."

Charley laughed.

"We have to keep up with the rest of the world, to be sure. And then, though truth may be stranger than fiction, it isn't always so entertaining; and that's what our masters want. All of which brings me round to my excuse for forcing my unimportant self upon your notice. They tell me there is no place like the mountain country for acquiring skill in the art of romancing; and for a story taller than Og, Gog, or Magog, apply to 'the man on the box.'"

Charley looked into his companion's eyes with such a good-natured twinkle in his own that Billy cottoned to him at once.

"I reckon we git credit fur more'n we deserve," he replied. "But thar's stories as come to hand what don't need much enlargin', an' that's a fact."

"That's just what I'm after! Nothing would suit me better than some spicy notes for a letter to the *Sunday Chronicle*. What's this I hear about Serpent Sam, as you call him? Some worthless blow-hard, tame enough, I reckon, if you were to corner him with a brierwood pipe for a pistol."

"Don't you try it, stranger—not ef you kin help it."

"Eh? Why not? Is he such a terrible fellow after all?"

"He's a bad man—I will say that."

"You know him, then?"

"I've had a chance to size him up a bit; an' my advice to you is, let him alone."

"Oh, I sha'n't trouble him, if he don't trouble me. But what is there interesting about him?"

"Waal, ye see, when a man gits a hard name in this hyar country, thar's plenty to lie about him; an' the bigger the whopper, the more thar is to swaller it."

"That's so the world round!"

"I reckon. So, like's not, most that they say about Serpent Sam is wind. But thar's a good deal o' smoke; an' I reckon thar's a mite o' fire."

"Give us the smoke and the fire both!" petitioned Charley, rubbing his hands in pleased expectancy.

"Waal, thar's his handle, to begin with."

"Snakes in his boots, eh?"

"Ef that was all, he wouldn't be nothin' out o' the common. But he carries 'em about in his clo'es."

"Well, I don't know whether to say that that is better or worse than the other. But I have known boys who did not shrink from having snakes in their pockets."

"Who said anythin' about pockets?"

"Why, you—didn't you?"

"Nary bit! I said clo'es."

"Clothes? But where in his clothes, if not in his pockets?"

"Anywhar. In his shirt; in his hat; in his trowser-legs, I reckon, ef they'd stay thar without wrigglin' down into his boots."

"Faugh! Next to his skin?"

"Waal, I reckon he hain't got no clo'es stuck to his hide sence last wash-day."

"But he may wear underclothes."

"What fur?"

Charley dropped his jaw and stared at this unexpected question. It opened up a new phase of life and habit. Of course, taking them the world over, more men go without underclothes than with them.

"An' these hyar boys ye talk about," went on Billy, contemptuously, before Charley quite re-

covered, "what kind o' snakes did they cart around in their pockets mostly?"

"Why, garter snakes—harmless, of course."

"Garter snakes be blowed! Sam, he's a grown-up man, he is."

"In evidence of which, he carries—what kind of snakes?"

"Rattlers."

"Oh, nonsense! Rattlesnakes about his clothes! Why, man, there wouldn't be whisky enough in the country to save him!"

"Rattlers I said, an' rattlers I stick to."

"Well, then, it must be that he gets bit to force an inhospitable community to stand treat."

"I hain't got nothin' to do with hospitals," persisted the stage-driver, doggedly. "What I swear by, is what I see; an' what I see, was rattlers—every time!"

"Suppose we say," suggested the reporter, smiling at his companion's misapprehension—"just to bring it into your line, you know—that he has to neutralize his whisky with rattlesnake poison, in order to drink against some of you stubby fellows? I didn't think of that."

"A tenderfoot might do that, to a limited extent, with advantage; but I reckon Sam kin hold his own with most, without no sich bracin'. But the pint is, he don't git bit."

"Is it possible! I have heard of people having this power of taming even the most venomous reptiles; but for my part, the only good snake is like the only good Injun: the deader, the better. But do you really mean to say that you have seen this man with living rattlesnakes on his person?"

"That's what I said."

"Well, I'll make a note of it; but you will excuse me if I say that I'm very much afraid most of my readers would have to see you, to believe it. You are a very earnest young man, when telling the truth!"

And Charley laughed gleefully.

Taking no offense, Billy went on:

"You may have a chance to see him yourself, ef you stay in this country long."

"No! Is that so? I'd give a little something to—with the privilege of such distance as lends enchantment, of course. Does he hang out about here?"

"He does."

"And you know him—personally?"

"Waal, I have dranked with him, an' won his money at draw poker, but I never slep' in the same bed."

"A prejudice against rattlers, eh? So that is how he comes by his name? And I suppose it is the source of most of the yarns in circulation about him."

"Waal, I dunno."

"What! You don't believe them?"

"I didn't say that, an' I didn't say the t'other thing."

"But do you believe them, really?"

"Which? Thar's a pile of 'em to choose from."

"Well, any of them. Is there such a place, for instance, as Rattlesnake Ridge, in this vicinity?"

"Oh, thar's the Ridge, fast enough."

"A place that goes by that name, you mean?"

"Sertain."

"But the snakes may or may not be there?"

"You can't prove it by me."

"Why not?"

"I never go huntin' fur snakes. It's bad enough to have 'em come huntin' me, now an' ag'in."

"Oh! you have had them after you, then?" laughed Charley.

"Waal, a man what drives a pop'lar coach has lots o' friends, when he takes the notion to spree it fur a spell. I ain't more'n human; an' the stuff they vend in these parts would knock a man lined with boiler iron."

"I'm sorry for you! But the Ridge—can we see it from any point on this road?"

"We jest kin, boss—from whar we set. Whoa-up!"

And Billy drew in his horses, and put on the brake, to give them a breathing spell.

"D'ye see that thar line o' peaks off yan?"

"The middle one, with the clump of pines just a little to the left of the crest?"

"Cedar, boss—red cedar. Spotted it the first clatter. That thar's the Ridge. Leastways, it's some'ers about thar. I don't jest put my finger on it."

"Like all wonders, its location is a little indefinite," laughed Charley. "It must be ten miles away."

"Twenty—an' a good twenty, if a rod."

"Is it possible? This clear mountain air is wonderfully deceptive. How could one get to it?"

"Thar you've got me, boss."

"Have you never had even so much curiosity as that?"

"Nary! I was pryin' when I was a boy; but a man gits cured o' that, or he gits buried before long, in this country."

"Pleasant prospect for a representative of the press! Now, we're nothing, if not curious. It is our business to get to the bottom of everything. As I have already heard of this Sam and his doings I wish to investigate him more particularly—to interview him, in fact."

"Better take the next coach back whar you come from, stranger. Thar ain't no room in this country fur a man what goes about seein' things. Them lives the longest what has the nack o' furgittin' easy what they do see, what don't belong to 'em. It's easier to git at the bottom of a high lot, than anythin' else about hyar."

"I'll have to risk it. You can't expect me to change my nature and training to accommodate myself to the peculiarities of this particular community. And to begin with, what is the story about the Ridge?"

Billy started up his horses before he began.

"Waal, they do say as Sam an' his darter, which he uses as a decoy, has a nest o' rattlers what he cultivates up thar."

"To kill his enemies with! That's the most horrible story I ever heard. It can't be possible that any one is so fiendish. Do you believe that he really uses them for such a purpose?"

"Waal, I dunno. I don't believe everythin' I hyear, no more'n I swaller everythin' I could git into my mouth."

"But, this decoy business? That's worse yet. Where could he find a woman who would lend herself to such atrocity?"

"Waal, I dunno. It's my experience you kin git a woman to do almost anythin', ef she sets a store by ye."

"His daughter, you say?"

"Some says that, an' some says the t'other thing."

"A beauty, at any rate. Have you seen her?"

"I've seen the girl what he calls his Black Bess."

"And is she so beautiful as they make out?"

"She's immense! You can tie to that."

"I'd rather see her than her father."

"It's more risky, I've a notion."

"We can't be always stopping because of risks, in this life."

"No more we kin. But we ain't so apt to be stopped fur good, ef we take a fool's advice once in a while."

"Black Bess! that's romantic enough. A woman of that kind ought to have midnight hair; and the devil of wickedness, as well as of mischief, looks most attractively out of sloe-black eyes. I think I must manage to get a glimpse of Black Bess, whatever the danger. I fancy she won't charm me!"

A light of dreamy tenderness came into Charley's eyes, and he smiled confidently, as he ventured that observation.

"Thar ain't no tellin' till ye try?" observed his companion, dryly.

"Do you know of anybody who has been actually led away by her fascinations?"

"Waal, thar was one what swore he meant to foller her up ef it led straight into Tophet."

"And he was as good as his word?"

"He disappeared between two days."

"The same that brought in that story about Sam's victims?"

"No; another one."

"What! two? Well, that *does* begin to look bad. Was any investigation made?"

"In this country? You hain't lived hyar long!"

"But are men killed, or spirited off, here, and no questions asked?"

"Ef you've got friends to pick it up, they may bury the other chap before you're cold. But who's goin' to lose sleep an' waste gunpowder—not to say reskin' the gittin' his skin made into a strainer—fur a galoot he wouldn't lend two bits to."

"You beat me in the argument. I have nothing but old-time prejudices to fall back on. In civilized communities a man is frequently made more account of when he is dead than when he was alive. Queer world, this!"

"Sich as it is, we kin take it, or leave it."

"And Sam—did any one have the temerity to tax him with the fellow's disappearance?"

"Oh, he was joked about it some."

"And what did he say?"

"He laughed, an' told 'em to send on another to look up the first."

"That was cool, at any rate. And the first of all, who professed to have tracked Sam to his

lair, and actually caught him at his tricks? He disappeared too?"

"You bet!—quicker."

"Do you believe that Sam really spirited him off? He was a half idiot, by all accounts."

"Waal, he was lackin' in the upper story, an' that's a fact."

"Don't you suppose, after he'd got up that yarn, he became frightened, and cut the country to escape being called to account by Sam?"

"He mought 'a' done that, an' not been so big a fool as when he blowed what he see—ef he did see anythin'."

"I suppose a man wouldn't be held to a very strict account here, for shooting such a slanderer?"

"Nobody but a fool would tell such a yarn till he was ready to back it up fur all he was worth."

"Delightful country—for the fellow that's quickest on the trigger! But, back of all this is that even more wildly improbable story I've heard of Sarpent Sam's identity with Navajo Nate, and his ruthless vendetta against the ministers of justice."

"The which, boss? I reckon I didn't never hear nothin' about no minister along o' Sam."

"About his trial for murder, his threat against judge and jury, his hanging and coming back to life, and his making his word good on the bodies of all who had a hand in his execution?"

"That's news to me."

"Oh, well. You're behind the times. It seems to me I'm giving you more information than I get out of you."

"I'd like to even you up, boss, ef I was in such good practice."

Charley laughed at this insinuation, as gleefully as he had when he "got in" on Billy.

"I'll tell the story all the same, and you can take it, or let it alone."

"That's everybody's privilege in this community. Great Scot, what a maw a man would have to carry around, ef it wasn't!"

"No doubt! Well, Navajo Nate—One of the Toughest, they used to call him—had the misfortune to drop his meat a little too near the Pacific seaboard, where such amusement is of sufficient rarity to excite public notice. So he was tried, condemned, and hanged. So much is matter of legal record. Now comes the story not quite so well attested. It is said that, either by collusion on the part of the sheriff, or by accident, the knot was not properly adjusted; and instead of having his neck broken by the drop, Nate was slowly strangled. Under ordinary circumstances this might be regarded as a misfortune; but in Nate's case it is said to have enabled his friends to resuscitate him."

"A blame sight bigger misfortune than t'other!" growled Boston.

"To imitate your form of answer," laughed Charley, "some have held so, others not. But that as it may be. At any rate, it was recalled that, while he was being led out of court, after his conviction, Nate had shaken his fist at judge and jury, and including them all in a general anathema, had sworn to bury every one of them before he was shoved under ground. Since then, it is rumored, one by one the members of the jury have dropped out of sight, along with the prosecuting attorney; so that there is no one left of all the subjects of Nate's vengeance but the judge. He, the gossips say, has been reserved for the last. What do you think of that for a yarn?"

"Waal, I've heard better, an' I've heard worse."

"Answered like the diplomat you are!" laughed Charley. "But do you believe it?"

"H'm!"

And Billy fell to scratching his head.

Before he made up his mind, the coach drove into a "city" with the classic name of Seven-up; and the dignity of his office of course required that he give his exclusive attention to the grand flourish with which he was expected to dash up to the door of the Dewdrop Inn.

After supper, intent upon studying the "honest miner" in his native haunt, Charley Kenyon dropped into the bar, where he had once more occasion to felicitate himself on the enjoyment of the ripe judgment of Billy Boston, the veteran stage-driver.

The evening had progressed till the room was densely packed, not only all the seats at the tables being occupied, but the standing-room being filled with a shuddering and elbowing throng, when the outer door was thrown violently open, and a man appeared on the threshold, with the challenge:—

"Whoop! I'm a-comin'! Stand from under all ye what don't want to scringe when the elephant drops!"

"An' thar ye have him," said Billy Boston—"Sarpent Sam, as big as life!"

CHAPTER II. SARPENT SAM.

To see above the crowd, Charley Kenyon rose to his feet, thereby thrusting his head into the stratum of foul air that floated in contact with the low ceiling, drifting sluggishly out of the window which he had opened over the table where he sat.

Through this blue cloud of tobacco smoke he saw a man full six feet in stature, with long, shaggy locks of hair and beard, as black as a raven's wing, and small, scintillating eyes, set too close together, with a very peculiar fascination about them.

Was it because they were so intensely black, or because they were small, or because of some trick of penetrating scrutiny?

They were restless, vigilant eyes, yet without the impression, which such eyes usually convey, of evasion. While they looked at you, their look was direct; but they seemed to probe so deep that it was not necessary to look long.

In dress Sam presented no points of difference from others of his class. He was heavily armed, especially the huge bowie-knife thrust down the back of his neck, which had a fellow in his bootleg.

With a swagger in keeping with his braggadocio announcement of himself, he strode into the saloon, grinning to see men shrink away at his approach.

"Gimme elbow-room, boys—gimme elbow-room. Thar ain't nothin' in this hyar world like plenty o' elbow-room. Ye've got to give a man room fur to die in, ef you don't give him room fur to live in. Bet yer sweet life thar's one mortal in this hyar world what's alluz goin' fur to have lots an' slathers o' room, livin' or dead. An', hyar's one o' my pets what has the same hankerin' fur elbow-room. An' he alluz gits it, too, you bet! It runs in the fam'ly—hey, pardner?"

And thrusting his hand into the bosom of his shirt, he drew forth a wriggling serpent, held by the middle, which, taking a turn about his wrist with the after part of its body, drew its head back as if to strike, and sprung the deadly rattle of the crotalus!

Swinging this at arm's length from side to side as he advanced, he cleared a path through the panic-stricken men, who surged apart with ejaculations of disgust and fear, for the most part, though some laughed with the brutal insensibility with which men of that class often make a scoff of death and deadly peril.

"Hold on, Sam! I'll strike you fur whisky, ef that thar animle o' yourn digs his p'ison fangs into my hide."

"Give Tim Barry a swipe. The snoozer hain't said his prayers in so long, it won't hurt him none to practice 'em a bit."

"Is it pray-ers, thin? Sure, divil a wan o' them will be said fur you, Joe Cammick, whin the Owl B'y gits the likes o' yees in Purgatory."

"Luck at Dinny Mahoney, will yees! Oh, Dinny! be ye fur thinkin', mon, it's the whisky? No, Dinny; that's a r'ale snake, that wan. The others niver come singly."

"Well, I'm blessed if I wouldn't rayther have a dozen o' the others than wan o' this. Give me the snakes that good whisky brings. They do no hairum."

"Hark to that, pard!" cried Sam, stroking the head of the ophidian. "These hyar snoozers niver had a gentleman come into their crowd before, an' they don't know how to appreciate him. Now, set up thar like a leetle man, an' tell that thar shiverin' whisky-slinger you takes your bitters straight."

Putting his hat on the bar, Sam placed the serpent in it, to coil for its deadly spring, erect its head, and run its quivering tongue out at the frightened bartender.

Measuring its length with his eye, the man kept a respectful distance as he served the beverage.

"Ye see, gents," laughed Sam, at the bar-keeper's expense, "a doctor allus hates his own medicine. Now, how many snakes do you 'low as Jimmy Madden has handed over this hyar bar? But the minute one of 'em's brung back to him—wagh! Jest look at that, now! He won't put the glass within his reach. Do you 'low as he's goin' to pay you fur sarvin' him, blast you! an' then help himself?"

"It's no other way he'll take it out o' my hand!" declared Madden, edging still further off.

"Waal, this alluz was a blasted hole, anyway. One o' these days I'll start a bar myself,

an' then I'll guarantee a rattler in every glass. Thar won't be no blanks in my lottery."

"Talkin' about rattlers," he went on, standing with his hands in his pockets and his feet wide apart, while he regarded the reptile critically, with his head to one side, "them's the knowin'-est cusses you ever see. Now you wouldn't 'low as that thar chap, brung up as he has been, in the woods, would 'a' got on to all the kinks an' crotchets o' genteel surciety; but he has. He's a teetot'ler, he is—blast my hide ef he ain't! Jest look a' this hyar now."

Dipping his finger into the glass of liquor that had been set before him, Sam touched the quivering tongue of the reptile with it.

Instantly the creature drew back its head and sprung its deadly rattle.

"Stiddy! stiddy!" commanded Sarpent Sam, fixing his eyes upon the bead-like orbs, that seemed to flash fire in the ophidian's head.

For some moments it seemed to be a struggle between the venomous monster and the man, the reared head oscillating from side to side, and the rattle rustling ominously.

But slowly the snake yielded, as if overpowered, and then the conqueror reached out his hand and stroked the sinking crest.

Low murmurs of wonder and horror arose in the crowd. Those nearest Sam drew further away.

With a chuckle the snake-charmer lifted the repulsive creature, and replaced it in the bosom of his shirt.

Tossing off his liquor at a gulp, he called for a second glass, and sent it racing after the first.

Spitting some of the last on the floor, he said:

"Pah! The serpent knows more'n his master. Nobody but a blasted fool would rot out his in'ards with that sort o' stuff."

Meanwhile Charley Kenyon and Billy Boston were busy commenting on this exhibition.

"What do ye think o' that thar?" asked the stage-driver.

"I don't know what to think about it yet," answered Charley, watching Sarpent Sam closely.

"Now you see he'd make an uncomfortable bed-feller."

"Undoubtedly. Does he stay about here much?"

"Oh, he comes an' goes, jest as he takes the notion. He's been hyar a purty considerable spell lately, though sometimes he's gone fur weeks, or even months together."

"Where does he go?"

"Waal, that I can't jest exactly say. To 'Frisco, likely, or off to s'uthard, maybe, once in a while, fur a change."

"Does he make himself conspicuous wherever he goes, by such a performance as this?"

"That I couldn't decide upon."

"You never heard of his doing it elsewhere?"

"No; not to say as I ever did."

"What does he do for a living?"

"Gamble, mostly, I reckon. He might prospect a bit, now an' ag'in; or trade hosses—lifts 'em when he gits a good chance, maybe. Then thar's road-agentin', when a man's hard up. I reckon he'd take a turn at that before he'd go hungry or naked."

"Quite a versatile genius! This is a very good country, I should think, for the exercise of his talents."

"None better in the world. Pluck your man, an' ef he squeals, plug him!"

"He's coming this way!"

"Sure's shootin'!"

"Billy, I want you to introduce me to him."

"The deuce you do! Ye don't mean it."

"Yes, I do! Hush!"

Charley said this last behind his hand, stroking his mustache.

But Billy Boston was not good at disguising his feelings, save at poker. Then the face of a wooden man could not tell fewer tales.

The astonishment had not faded from his very open countenance when Sarpent Sam slouched up to the table, and he hung fire on the introduction till the matter was taken out of his hands.

"I hope I don't inconvenience nobody, gents," said Sam, reaching into the bosom of his shirt, and drawing forth two or three reptiles intertwined and writhing about one another. "Ef you will allow me, I'll give these hyar pets o' mine a mite of an airin'. My washin' days is a good ways apart; an' I reckon they hain't got a very sweet-smellin' berth in this hyar ole raglan. I wouldn't like to stay in thar myself, with my head, as a stiddy location; an' I 'low to treat my friends as white as I'd have them treat me."

Hanging loose and baggy above where it was

girt in by his belt, an undulating motion of his shirt showed that it was a harbor for still more of the vipers.

As he took them out, he put them on the table on either side of which Charley Kenyon and Billy Boston sat.

That is to say, the stage-driver had sat on his side when Sarpent Sam first made a motion which showed what he contemplated doing; but at sight of the first reptile Billy incontinently abandoned his place, crying:

"Excuse me! No rattlers in mine, ef you please!"

The young reporter, on the other hand, stood his ground, or rather sat it. He turned very pale, and involuntarily shrank as far back as he could without arising; but he kept his seat, staring at the wriggling pests as if fascinated.

It was plain that this fortitude—or let us call it hardihood—took Sarpent Sam by surprise, for he stopped drawing out the serpents before he had taken them all from their strange receptacle.

"Waal," he declared, after he had stared at Charley for a little while, "you're a nerry one, anyway. Been in this hyar business on yer own account, I reckon."

"No," answered Charley. "This is my first experience at such close quarters."

"Why in Cain don't you light out, then, like the rest do?"

"I prefer to remain where I am. If you will excuse me, I fancy I have the right of the first comer."

"Oh, I ain't disputin' that. An' you've got a perfect right to stand up fur your rights. Every gent in this hyar country has all the rights he kin hang on to. But then thar's rights an' rights. Some folks ain't so stiff-backed about one thing as they be about another. Mighty few stops to arguify with these hyar pets o' mine. Cur'ous; but ye'll see a snoozer what's got his back up most o' the time, along o' other gents rubbin' his fur the wrong way—ye'll see him cave like a Missouri landslide, when it comes to these hyar leetle beauties."

"As you say, it is a matter of individual taste, I suppose."

"Say, pardner!" burst forth Sarpent Sam, "I like your style, blow me ef I don't! Who be ye, anyhow; an' whar d'ye hail from?"

And seating himself in the place Billy Boston had so hastily vacated, the Terror of Rattlesnake Ridge thrust his hand across the table for a friendly shake.

He extended it only half-way, so that his hand was not more than a foot directly above the heads of the snakes he had bunched on the table; and to meet it Charley would have to put his own in the same jeopardy.

Of course it was a still further test of his nerve.

Perhaps there was not another man in the room who would have hesitated to refuse such a challenge, though most of them would have fought a duel across the table if the occasion demanded.

With only a slight compression of the lips Charley Kenyon reached out and took Sarpent Sam's proffered hand.

"My name is Charles T. Kenyon," he said, in a steady voice, lifting his eyes so as to meet Sarpent Sam's. "I am one of those fellows who are known as 'Our Special Correspondent.'"

"Waal, you be a special, fur a fact," declared Sarpent Sam, giving the hand a hearty shake, and then releasing it, as if disposed not to run a good thing into the ground. "An' I'll tell you what you want, pardner, an' want it bad, ef you hain't got it already. You want a special handle, an' I'm jest the chap to fit ye out with one."

"Thank you! What sort of a handle do you propose?"

"I'm biddin' fur Cheeky Charley. How's that, boys? Won't that fit?"

By the general assent that swept over the room, Charley knew that he was dubbed, for such time as he might remain in Seven-up, at any rate.

"But you don't correspond with nary human what I've ever run acrost," pursued Sarpent Sam. "What in Cain do you correspond with, pardner?"

"I am a correspondent of the 'Frisco Chronicle.'"

"Waal, they've got a good one. Long may you correspond! But would you jest as leave tell me why you resked this hyar?"

"Willingly. Using a little judgment, I inferred that I should be in no greater danger than you."

"An' I knowed what I was about! Waal, gents," turning to the crowd admiringly, "that comes o' carryin' a head-piece around with ye. Go you an' do likewise."

As if satisfied, Sam gathered up the reptiles, and returned them to his shirt.

Then addressing Charley:

"Ef you'll be pleased to nominate your p'ison, we'll drink to better acquaintance. I want to see more of sich a chap as you."

"I will smoke," said Charley. "I never drink."

"You—nev—er—drink!" repeated Sarpent Sam, slowly rising from his seat, while he stared at the man who had the temerity to refuse to drink in that community, even after he had proved himself equal to rattlesnakes.

"I never drink," reiterated Charley, straightening back a little in his seat, yet perfectly at ease.

"Young man," said Sarpent Sam, frowning blackly, "you're new to the country, I take it?"

"Like my recent encounter with your charming associates, this is my first experience."

"Then you don't know what it means to decline a drink when a gent invites you?"

"I know what it means in my own case."

"An' what might it mean in your case, if I may make so bold as to ask?"

The answer came in a perfectly quiet tone, with none of the metallic ring of defiance that most men would have infused into it.

"A respectful, yet inflexible, No."

CHAPTER III.

TO DRINK, OR NOT TO DRINK.

THE correspondent's conversation was yea, yea, and nay, nay, with a vengeance.

Sarpent Sam stared at him in perplexity, taking him in from head to foot, or rather from head to waist—so much of him as appeared above the table.

His posture was of the easiest and most self-possessed. He leaned lightly against the wall with his right shoulder and head. On taking his hand from Sam's clasp, he had dropped it carelessly into the side-pocket of his sack-coat.

There seemed to be no purpose in that at the time; but now, as his eye ran down to it, Sam asked, with quite a change in his voice:

"Pardner, do you go heeled?"

"Not for assault," answered Charley, readily.

"But when it comes to defense, I hope I may never be found quite asleep—in this country!"

He made that addendum with just a perceptible twinkle of the eye.

"Maybe you've got the gall to unmask your battery," suggested Sam, but as if he didn't believe what he said.

"You will find me always ready to indulge a reasonable request, respectfully put," answered the quiet correspondent.

And he lifted his hand sufficiently to bring in to view from his pocket a small cocked revolver.

A glance satisfied Sarpent Sam that it was in competent hands. He was looking as nearly straight into the bore as he could calculate with his eye, the weapon being somewhat in shadow.

"How did you know as pistols would be next called fur?"

"I didn't suppose they would."

"Then what did you drop your hand on to that thar joker fur, the minute you let go o' mine?"

"From forecast based on previous observation of human nature."

"Eh?"

"I thought whisky naturally followed a handshake."

"Oh! An' you was gittin' a good ready fur to decline?"

"Exactly."

"Waal, that ag'in comes o' carryin' a head-piece around with ye. Fur a tenderfoot, you're doin' right well. An' you stick to it—you be a tenderfoot?"

"In the strictest sense of the word."

"Never was in this country before?"

"Never."

"Nor any like it?"

"No."

"Then whar did you l'arn that thar trick?"

"What trick?"

"O' trainin' that gun on a feller's weather optic."

"By practicing before a pier glass."

"Before—beg pardon—which?"

"Before a long looking-glass. I aimed at the eye of my own reflection. Of course I could see when the figure in the glass aimed directly at my eye. Then I made sure of myself by shooting at a mark in my room."

"Gittin' ready to come out hyar, eh, an' slap the chops of us ole grizzlies?"

"Oh, no. There are places in 'Frisco that a reporter has to visit, where it is handy to be able

to say what you please, and back it up after it is said."

"What kind o' places?" asked Sam, his eyes slowly contracting.

"Why, Murderer's Lane, say," answered Kenyon, carelessly, as if it were a locality taken at random. "When there has been a butchery there at night, somebody must go in and find out all about it, or the dear public would miss the usual spicing of its breakfast coffee and rolls. Murderer's Lane and the alleys of the Chinese quarter, at two o'clock in the morning, are as interesting places to visit as even the Dewdrop Inn, the Pride of Seven-Up."

"So you've been in Murderer's Lane, eh?"

"Often enough to be pretty well acquainted with the boys."

"M—yes—well acquainted! Routed out a pile o' murderers in your time, I reckon?"

"A few—a few," with an air of modesty.

"Yes, a few," rubbing his chin reflectively.

Then, with an outburst and a penetrating scrutiny:

"Say, Mister Man, how old be you, anyway?"

"An even quarter of a century."

"Oh!—ah!—yes!—twenty-five! H'm!"

The tension of Sam's expression relaxed. He seemed again at his ease.

Charley did not appear to notice anything unusual in his manner.

He now proposed, with a pleasant smile, as Sam's ruminative pause left a good opening for a diversion:

"Will you smoke with me, or shall I drink with you?"

"You do drink?" exclaimed Sam, in surprise.

"When I feel like it, which isn't often."

"You don't feel like it now?"

"No. If our host will excuse me, I am somewhat of a stickler for quality."

"Waal, blast me ef you shall p'ison yerself with the stuff they give us hyar," declared Sarpent Sam, with a decision which showed that he was ready to maintain that position with his "gun." "Barkeeper—"

But here he was interrupted by the newspaper man:

"Allow me."

And he drew cigars from the inner breast-pocket of his coat.

Sam took one with an exaggerated affectation of gingerliness, smelt of it, and threw back his head with a vociferous:

"Whoop! Wake snakes, fur the kingdom am a-comin'!"

Lighting the weed, he spread his feet wide apart under the table, planted his elbows on the table, and turning the cigar round and round with both hands, gave himself up to its full enjoyment, mumbling between the whiffs:

"Puff!—m!—puff!—m!—puff!"

Seeing a longing look on Billy Boston's expansive countenance, Charley invited him to a participation of the delights of the enchanting nicotine.

But the crowd watched the favored trio with such undisguised watering of the mouth, that the correspondent took compassion on them.

"Here, you ragamuffin!" he cried, seizing by the flaxen shock a barelegged urchin who had forced his way into the inner circle, to stare open-mouthed at the redoubtable Sam, and at the equally notable man who had braved his serpents. "Find out where my room is, and fetch the gripsack yod find there."

"Will ye gimme one?" demanded the urchin.

"What! you?"

"Gimme one o' Jimmy Madden's, then."

"I'll give you a chuck out of the window, if you don't do as I tell you!"

"And, as with all great men, no matter what the field of their sway, there was that in Charley Kenyon's manner which commanded instant and unquestioning obedience.

Sassy Sol—as the boy was called, from his irrepressible pertness—went off like a shot, consoling himself with the reflection that he was at least having the honor to serve the pluckiest man who had presented himself at Seven-up for many a day.

Receiving the gripsack, Charley opened it, discovering a cigar box, the lid of which he pried up with his knife.

"Here!" he commanded, giving the box to Sol, "pass that to the barkeeper first, and then take it around through the crowd."

While the boy was executing this commission, Charley set to rummaging idly—so it seemed—in the gripsack, which he held in his lap below the level of the table. As he ran over the contents of the receptacle, he stopped to glance at this and that—it might be the superscription of an envelope, or a line or two of the contained epistle, or a keepsake which he turned over in

his hand for the sake of the memories it called up.

From time to time he glanced up at Sarpent Sam, with a smile of amusement at his exaggerated enjoyment of his cigar.

Who would have supposed, from his careless, absent air, that he was really comparing the face of the snake-charmer with a photograph which lay where his carefully—careless rummaging would not disturb it?

The picture was a man in prison garb, with his face smooth-shaven, and his head "sand-papery." Of course the differences between it and the man before him were striking. Besides, it was old and faded. If anything was likely to defy the changes of time and circumstance, it was the eyes. To these Charley gave particular attention.

Long before he was satisfied, his little henchman returned with what were left of the cigars—not many—and set the box on the corner of the table.

"Now help yourself," said the provider of this treat. "It's a mighty bad thing for a boy of your years; but I reckon you, with your surroundings, are a poor subject for a temperance lecture."

The boy's eyes opened and his face broadened with gratified astonishment.

"Kin I?" he asked holding back with incredulity.

To be allowed to smoke what was delighting all the rest, seemed like too great a treat to be without some trick about it.

"You can't if you wait till I have changed my mind," answered Charley. "On second thought—"

But his second thought, if a serious one, which was doubtful, came too late.

With a stroke as quick as one of Sarpent Sam's rattlesnakes, Sassy Sol had snatched a cigar, and sprung back with a whoop.

The reporter looked after him laughing, as he wedged his body into the crowd, ready for instant flight if called upon to yield back his prize, but left his head, with its face like the mask of the merry Momus, still protruded into the inner circle.

"Pard," interposed Sarpent Sam, who by this time had worn off the edge of first enjoyment sufficiently to find voice again, "what be you doin' in this hyar country, anyway? Ef yer humble sarvent kin put you up to anythin', command me."

"I'm out here for an airing; and I want to see every striking view within a radius of thirty miles. I'm a bit of a painter when I have nothing else to do, and I mean to take home with me a sketch or two of rugged landscape. Unless you like tramping about in the mountains, with nothing to do but stare at inaccessible peaks and down long reaches of valley, I don't see how you can help me out any."

"Oh! that's your lay, is it? Waal, I tramp about some myself, only I set more store by what may chance to be found underground, than by what's on top. I kin see all the landscape I have any use fur through the bottom of a whisky glass."

"We both feed our heads," laughed Charley; "only, what I take in, stops there. But that is no reason why, if we chance to meet in the hills, we shouldn't pass the time of day kindly."

Sarpent Sam admitted that this was what he called "a fair proposition." He would be glad, he professed, to take Charley by the hand at any time.

However, as the reporter excused himself gambling, as he had declined to drink, Sam's powers of entertainment seemed to have reached their natural limit, and he soon took himself off.

"What did you want to know him fur?" asked Billy Boston, in the confidential way that had sprung up between him and the correspondent of the *Frisco Chronicle*.

Charley looked him in the eye with a meaning smile.

"I thought it might be well to have him know me," was his answer.

"M!" responded Billy, making the most he could of it.

In the morning, when he had to take his departure, Charley Kenyon appeared with an artist's portfolio under his arm, and a sachel like a pilgrim's scrip on his hip, as gay and jaunty as if he had nothing more serious on his mind than the mountain views he had told Sarpent Sam about.

"Why so long a face, my jolly hearse-driver?" was his hail to Billy Boston.

"I hate to leave you hyar—I do so!" declared Billy, with unmistakable sincerity in his lugubrious voice.

"Eh? Why? Are you afraid I'll demoralize the place? Seven-up is a paradise—for land-sharks."

"Somethin' tells me as you'll be chewed up before I git back."

"And you don't like to lose me, old fellow? Pshaw! I didn't suppose you were so tender-hearted. But, I say!—don't you fancy they'll find me tough 'chawing,' eh? But there! I don't mean to get into mischief—honor bright!"

"I'll bet my soul you do, before the day is out. Whar be you goin'?"

"Along with you, if you'll let me. There! isn't that keeping out of mischief?"

"Along o' me?"

"You'll give me a lift; won't you?"

"Whar to?"

"Why, along the road you're going, of course. I wouldn't ask you to go out of your way, would I?"

"I don't know what you'd do, ef the way I'm goin' didn't lead straight over toward Rattlesnake Ridge."

"Nol Does it? Well, now, that's what I call lucky. I meant to go over there one of these days; and why not to-day as well as any other? If you are going that way, it will be just the thing."

"Say, pard!—you can't pull the wool over my eyes."

"No?"

"You bet your sweet life, you can't!"

"Well, you are so confident, you tempt me to try it, some time when I have thought up a good way."

"I tell you, the way you've already thought up won't work."

"Oh, come, now! You don't mean to intimate that you deem me capable of anything so disingenuous or premeditated—"

"Discombobilation o' the dictionary! Cut it short! You're goin' to see that gal!"

"In this dress?"—seizing the lower corners of his jacket, and throwing it open, as he turned round for general inspection, to exhibit its inappropriateness. "No, sir! When I call upon the young lady in question—and I beg of you, correct your careless way of referring to her—I mean to go in evening dress, whatever the time of day. I tell you, I'm bound to make an impression! I say, Billy!—what would they do with a fellow who came out in a claw-hammer coat and white necktie and kids out here?"

Charley was so gay that Billy's grim face relaxed.

"You're too full o' the deuce to talk sense to," he said. "But, that won't save your bacon, ef you set Sarpent Sam on to saltin' of it. Will you give me your promise that you won't go to runnin' after that gal, ef she jest happens around, with a view to scoopin' you in?"

"Kismet, friend Boston! You ought to understand that, with all the priestesses of hocus-pocus that harbor in your namesake city. Fate! Destiny! Promises are ropes of sand. Man proposes, and God disposes. If I am doomed to fall under the allurements of this enchantress, what is the use of my hedging against her baleful sway, with so frail a barrier as the promise of a young man of my age and—well, inclinations, that he won't follow a pretty girl when he gets the chance? But I'll promise you this, if that will satisfy you—that it won't be with a view to matrimony, as they say when they advertise for a fair correspondent between the ages of twenty and thirty-five."

Plainly the newspaper man was determined not to talk sense that morning.

"Git up hyar, blast you!" cried Billy Boston, with that pretense of impatience which goes with a smile of affectionate indulgence.

"Catch!" cried Charley, giving his portfolio a twirl. "Well, you *are* a pretty fair short-stop. I thought you might muff it, and give me the trouble of picking it up on the other side of the coach. Now, give us your hand, will you?"

And with a step on the hub, another on the tire of the wheel, and a flying leap at the finish, he landed on the box beside his friend.

During the "lift" the stage-driver did not urge the matter further; but when, some miles out of Seven-up, Charley leaped down from his perch, and turned his face toward Rattlesnake Ridge, Billy called after him:

"Now mind what I tell ye. Ef you go an' git spoilt, I'll lam all Cain out o' what's left o' ye ag'in' I come back!"

Charley kissed his hand to him, and with a light laugh on his lips disappeared among the crags and frondage.

As he approached the Ridge, the way became more and more rugged, till he soon had all the climbing he wanted, if that was what he was after. The views, too, were magnificent in every

direction; but though he stopped often and looked about, it was with the sharp glance of inspection, rather than the lingering look of artistic enjoyment.

Of a sudden, however, his whole manner changed; he stopped dead short, and ejaculated under his breath:

"By Jove!"

CHAPTER IV.

A QUESTION OF "CHEEK."

By the craning of his neck and the look of eager interest on his face, any one would have said that the mountaineering correspondent had made a very acceptable discovery at last, whether or not it was what he had come to see.

A glance over his shoulder in the same direction must have put the groutiest old misanthrope in sympathy with his pleasurable excitement.

What had arrested him was a spectacle for gods and men!—a young girl, with such a figure as the old Greek masters—who knew what was what, I can tell you, in their line!—most loved to chisel, standing on a bowlder, yet sustaining most of her weight by the strength of her arm, as, grasping a limb of a tree, she reached far out after a scarlet blossom that swung tantalizingly just beyond her reach.

Of course Charley's first gallant impulse was to rush to her assistance.

"Miss—ahem! I beg your pardon, but if you will allow me!"

It would have been the neatest thing in the world, but for one consideration. That one consideration was sufficient to hold Charley back.

Instead of discovering himself, he took pains to see that he was properly screened, if the girl should chance to look his way.

Then he set himself to study her closely.

From top to toe, she was dressed in buckskin, tanned a snowy white, and fringed and beaded with artistic taste. Even her hat, instead of being felt, was of the same material.

To her belt, which was rather a sash, was hung a small revolver, and on the right hip, most convenient to her hand, a poniard-like knife.

But these did not complete the armament of this Rocky Mountain amazon; for against the tree leaned a short carbine, with a breast-strap running from stock to barrel.

In striking contrast with her white costume, a mass of raven-black hair fell loosely about the girl's shoulders, the beauty of which was especially well exhibited by her present posture, which caused it to hang free, a cascade of rippling loveliness.

As to her features, the hidden watcher could see only the soft curve of her neck rounding into the oval of her cheek, bronzed with the kisses of the mountain air and sunshine, yet flushed too with the roses that simple living gives; these and the tip of an eyebrow, the point of an apparently straight nose, the curve of a short upper lip, and the swell of a rather pronounced chin—such as old Rome often gave the world in its women—all seen from a point behind the line of profile view.

Baffled in her attempt to reach the flower, the girl leaped down from the rock, and retreating a few paces, drew her revolver, and turned her quest into a test of skill, by shooting at the stem of the blossom.

Whiff! crack! and it came fluttering into her outstretched hand, as she ran forward to catch it.

"By Jove! no mean shot!" ejaculated Charley Kenyon, admiringly. "I should prefer not to have her get the drop on me at twelve paces!"

And he laughed lightly to himself, little dreaming that she would ever cause him anxiety by such a menace.

He could now see that her face was fully up to the promise of the half revelation which had added piquancy to her first pose.

Slipping the flower through a button-hole in the bosom of her dress, and slinging her carbine at her back, Black Bess, as Billy Boston had called her, continued her stroll, all unsuspecting of the eyes that were upon her.

With all the caution at his command, Charley Kenyon set out to follow her.

As he was behind, he could not see the expression of her face, except the half glimpses she occasionally afforded him by turning partly round; but her manner showed that she was not out hunting, and he gradually came to the conclusion that she was undergoing some painful mental disturbance.

At times she seemed overcome by profound sadness, when she would sit down, and gaze at the ground, or into the far distance. But this mood she shook off with determination, rousing

some passion within her that made her cheeks turn pale and her eyes flash, while her relaxed figure grew rigid with resolve.

Once the dislodgement of a stone under Charley's foot caused her to look round, at first startled, but with the return of repose as she discovered nothing.

After that, however, though Charley did not then attach it to this cause, her movements became more erratic. She would disappear and reappear in a way that made it difficult to follow her without self-betrayal.

It was not long before Charley lost her altogether. After waiting for some time for her reappearance, without venturing too near, he was forced to go quite up to the spot where he had last seen her, or abandon the quest out and out.

"Can it be some retreat that she has slipped into?" he asked himself. "There might be the mouth of a cave in the face of that cliff. But if it proves that she has only sat down to rest awhile, I shall get myself into hot water before long. Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained. Here goes!"

Assuming his most careless air, and pretending to be peering about as an artist might, he strolled along in such a way as to pass the spot where Bess had disappeared.

As she was not to be seen, he kept on; but, convinced that she could not have gone in that direction, he returned to the spot, and essayed another way.

Back again no wiser than when he set out, he now gave himself undisguisedly to a careful search.

He examined the ground narrowly, for some signs of a trail; but her moccasined foot had left no trace.

"Hang it all!" he ejaculated, unguardedly aloud, "she can't have gone down into the ground, nor up in the air. She must be somewhere about."

This was most excellently reasoned, as ten steps further proved; for, searching in every direction, he all of a sudden stumbled directly upon the object of his quest.

"Well, sir! are you satisfied?" asked Black Bess, coolly.

"Oh I—indeed, my dear madam—Miss—I beg your pardon!" stammered Charley, for once in his life taken aback, and losing the cool assurance of his profession.

"For what?" asked the girl, regarding him steadily, with two or three fine lines between her black eyebrows. "For having followed me? or for having found me?"

But by this time Cheeky Charley was himself again. She wasn't the first pretty girl he had met in that encounter of the eye, by a good many. And then, he wasn't in love with her; which makes all the difference in the world.

He had found his hat, of course, in the first moment of abject apology; but nervously, and so, ungracefully. But now he swept her a bow as courtly in its ease as if he were in a parlor—on his native heath, so to speak.

"Not for my determination to know," he answered, in measured tones, "but for the indiscretion into which my diffidence—altogether unusual, I assure you—betrayed me. If I had followed my first impulse, I should have sprung forward when I first saw you, and craved the privilege of getting that flower for you. By the way, how would it do to bestow it upon me, as a constant reminder of my delinquency? I shall continue to do penance long after it has ceased to reproach me with its unfaded beauty, I beg you to believe."

Now, take it all round, this was a very handsome speech. To begin with, it was the speech of a woman-tamer. It said, as plainly as words could have said: My dear, I am not at all afraid of you. Come! we are not going to make a mountain of a mole-hill. It was perfectly natural for a fellow in the lustiness of youth to follow a pretty girl with the respectful admiration I bring you; and it is equally in the nature of things for the pretty girl aforesaid not to be unappeasably wroth at finding herself the object of the beforementioned admiration, and hence followed, as had been stated! Don't rustle your curl-papers at me. I've been behind the scenes!

In the second place, it was an honest confession, without a shadow of evasion—or it appeared to be. He owned to having followed her for a good half hour.

Just a dash of color came into the girl's cheeks, which had been pale with displeasure; and the hard repulsion in her eyes softened.

She ignored his allusion to the flower, however.

"May I ask why you have been following me?" she rather demanded.

"To find out where you live," he answered, with an open smile.

"You are very frank, sir."

"When you come to know me better, you will see that that is my leading characteristic. I suppose that accounts for its coming to the surface so early in our acquaintance."

"There is no likelihood of my knowing you better."

"Oh, don't say that! Of course I have made a fool of myself, by not doing the gentlemanly thing in a gentlemanly way. I never yet allowed myself to be overcome by a lady's—ah—presence, but I had occasion to regret it. You see, I thought if I made sure of you by finding out where your home is, I could then secure a presentation in the usual form—in society, I mean. Anybody but an idiot, or an over-impressionable booby, would have known that such formality could be waived in the delightful simplicity of rural life, and—"

"So forth! You have made good choice of a subject for your laughter. If it should prove that I am not the simple rustic you imagine—"

"Don't you suppose I knew that?" broke in Charley, with a frank smile that somehow worked like a charm in calming her flushed resentment. "Come! what is the use of our playing at cross-purposes? I knew who you were the moment I saw you. Of course I have heard about you—the most extravagant stories!—ever since I came into this section of the country. I'll be frank with you. My idea was—fiction, the Divine Huntress returned to earth; fact, an Amazonian young woman, muscular and—well, rosy. I am ashamed to say that I came out here with the flippant purpose of capturing that young person, stripping her of romance, and holding her up—in guise probably no truer than that with which she had been invested by her idealizers—to the ribald derision of a jaded public. My only excuse is, that I am a newspaper man, and that we do the mean things of which we are sometimes guilty, not always for the same reason why dogs delight to bark and bite, but because it is a matter of bread and butter to us; and we get it at anybody's expense."

"When I saw you, I was—pardon me!—overcome. I thought you would see through me at a glance, and—if you will once more pardon the levity of the figure—refuse to be captured, with whatsoever humility my former irreverent purpose was repented of."

"Now you know all, or nearly all—why I came, why I dared not present myself, why—Well, some day I may reveal the secret of my persistent quest, even after I had abandoned my ungenerous and ungentlemanly design."

"And now, what should be the reward of one who has made such a clean breast of it? Do you remember the story Mark Twain tells, of the good little Johnny he read about in his Sunday-school book, whose conscience so smote him that he confessed to his mamma that he had stolen some jam? It didn't work quite so satisfactorily, you remember, when Mark tried the same scheme with his mother. But then, of course, it was a very wicked plot for so small a boy; and Mark richly deserved the whipping he got, in place of the recompense of more jam which rewarded the good little Johnny's sincere repentance. But don't you think that the sorry little Johnnies of real life ought to be encouraged?"

Never did a man who had "put his foot in it," more gracefully make a virtue of necessity. Our special correspondent had the rare tact to know when to sail by the polar star of fact, just near enough to make it seem that he was telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Who could suspect any reserve, when he went into the matter with such fullness and circumstantiality?

Then, he had managed to insinuate a compliment here and there as he went along, so deftly that it seemed necessary to the fullness of his explanation. Could a woman stand out in condemnation of a man for what he had thought of her before seeing her, when he had recognized her as a superior being at the first glance? And what was that which he had left unsaid—his subsequent motive for persisting in his quest of her, after he had abandoned the purpose of making her the subject of a racy article for the Sunday issue of his paper?

Oh, well, of course she thought of that, but at once turned her attention another way!

"You plead your cause very cleverly," she said, smiling faintly.

"Convincingly—movingly, I hoped you would say," he urged. "But we can't stand looking at each other in meditative silence while you are making up your mind whether or not you can consent to forgive me. Suppose we fill in the

time— But there," stopping to smile at the girl deprecatingly, before opening the sachel which he unslung from his shoulder, "of course you won't for a moment think I think that the old quip about after-dinner favors applies to a woman, much less to a girl for whom the world is yet bathed in that light which never was on land or sea. It is myself alone I am considering, as usual! The fact is, I never could bear repentance on an empty stomach. To have an aching void to two parts of one's anatomy at one and the same time, and so closely adjacent at that, is not to be endured if it can be cured. That is one of those delightful rules which work both ways—don't you think so?—especially delightful this way!"

And, opening the sachel, he took from it and arranged in tempting array all the requisites of a truly dainty lunch, flying about in exaggerated liveliness in keeping with his rattling far-rago.

"To be downright frank with you—and that, you remember, is my leading characteristic—I hope to win you to a favorable consideration of my plea through the benign influence of picnic associations. The very word *picnic* ought to bring a smile to any girl's lips. Then what should be the effect of such an Arcadian spread as this? Oh, a veritable napkin, which seems to have gone out of fashion in this truly rural retreat of silvan simplicity. One of the effects of the won-n-n-derful climate, I have no doubt. But what I especially hope you will note is, what a very good little boy, how promising a young man, must I have been and still be, to have acquired and yet to retain such a taste for picnics, Sunday-school and other. Simplicity of heart, I beg you to believe, and an appreciation of—what do you think?—biscuits that do not smell to heaven of mur—that is to say, of soda. Just look at that! Isn't it a beauty? White as the snow on Shasta's lofty—ah—lofty— You know what I mean. Oh, I break into song once in a while, in my inspired moments!"

"And, by the same token, what's the reason there isn't inspiration in that? A bottle of wine to make her shine— But the biscuit, you say—how have I kept them from getting stale between Frisco and here? Oh, that is my secret. But I'll tell you, in confidence. I brought the flour, and made 'em myself! How's that? Ye cook—ye jack-booted and revolver-burdened cook of ye Dewdrop Inn, ye incomparable hostler of far-famed Seven-up—to be permitted to lay unhalloved hands on his sacred skillets and pans, him had I to bribe. With a small fortune did I endow that wretched man; but I got my money's worth out of him, none the less, by scouring his tinware full of holes. In vain do the imprecations of the potato-paring tyrant ascend through the murky air of his kitchen to the averted ear of Heaven. Never again will the accumulated grime of ages, tribute of their richness and savor left by unnumbered dinners, stop the gaping mouths through which those long-suffering servants of the stomach of man cry aloud for rest, sweet rest, that comes to all—to them, that battered and rusty repose which awaits in the sheol of dilapidated culinary utensils."

"There!" concluded the rhapsodist, standing off to gaze at his work with smiling complacency, while with outspread hands he submitted it to the criticism of his companion, "refuse me, if you have the heart!"

The color had been coming and going in the girl's cheeks, as she watched the busy speaker and listened to his nonsense, till now she met his eye rather shyly, with a starry luster lurking under her drooping eyelids. It was plain that the reporter's devil-may-care assurance—respectful withal—had taken her fancy, where a more diffident approach might have left her in cold indifference.

"If I accept your invitation," she said, with just a trace of incertitude in her voice, "I suppose you will think that I am in the habit of doing such things with entire strangers."

"Oh, no!" he answered, brightly. "You don't often get the chance."

Now the color swept to the girl's temples, not in anger, as before, but with embarrassment.

He had conquered her. Her heart acknowledged his right of command. He could speak to her with this freedom, without rousing the impulse of resentment. Instead, there sprung up a strong desire to yield to his overtures, and fall into this confidential relation.

Why not? she asked herself. She was his equal. He would not dare to presume on her indulgence, any more than if he had met her, as he might have done, in a city drawing-room.

This thought brought a flash of defiance to her eyes, and it was with something of his own banner that she answered:

"Having a chance—and being hungry, I shall avail myself of it!"

Replied Cheeky Charley, gayly:

"An opportunity well embraced,
Is a pretty girl with a taper waist!"

"Sit ye down there, where I spread my handkerchief over this log for your accommodation. I will seek the repose that requiteth honest toil on this stone, over against you. Now, then! the choicest shall be your meed. You honor me in the acceptance."

CHAPTER V.

DIRTY WORK.

THE gayety of the reporter was infectious. In spite of herself, the girl gradually relaxed her reserve. Long before their repast was over, he had her laughing and chatting with a freedom that, in odd moments when she stopped to think about it, astonished her and made her cheeks burn with confusion.

He told her who he was, and what he did, and what he purposed doing, and told her truly—up to a certain point. Many of the jolly times that relieve the rigor of a reporter's life did he recount, with the same airiness that made his correspondence so readable. Only once did he touch upon those terrible experiences which implied the carrying of his very life into jeopardy in the pursuit of his vocation. The girl's cheek blanched as he spoke, and she was not aware of the earnestness with which she let her eyes rest upon his.

To relieve this painful impression came a touch of pathos, which revealed the serious human sensibility underlying his outward sportiveness; then back again to laughter, in keeping with the occasion.

He gave the listener the same impression he had given Sarpent Sam—that he was a hard-worked newspaper drudge out on a lark, and determined to make the most of it.

He seemed to be engrossed in himself and in the good time he had come to have, and to entertain no interest in the girl save as she might contribute to that good time. He displayed no prying curiosity. Indeed, he made no allusion to her, except to seek her sympathy in opinion or taste with his own views or predilections, as this, that, or the other came up in the conversation.

At the conclusion of their regalement, however, he came out with a startling proposal.

"Do you know?—I want to sketch you. I have been looking at you."

But by this time the girl's whole manner had changed. All the confidential ease died out of her eyes, and she froze into rigid repulsion, through which gleamed a glance of reproach.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the reporter, looking directly into her eyes with a sudden assumption of seriousness which he had not thus far manifested. "What do you take me for? I intend to give the sketch to you, of course."

Then her eyes fell in confusion.

"I was thinking of the trouble," she stammered.

"Oh, no you weren't!" he contradicted, with merciless insistence. "But you were entirely right; only mistaken in the person."

"Do you blame me?" she asked, making confession, and at the same time appealing to him as a woman does only to one whom she would not estrange.

"Of course not," he answered.

Then, with a return to his bantering humor, he added:

"Not so much as you will blame yourself when you come to know me better."

This assumption of continued acquaintance she did not now repudiate, as she had done at the outset; but very humbly she conceded:

"You are very kind. You may make the sketch, if you wish to."

It was made, in the same off-hand way which was characteristic of the artist in all that she had seen of him, and proved to be so faithful a reproduction of herself as to bring a flush of embarrassed pleasure to her cheeks.

What a clever fellow he was! He seemed to have everything at command.

"And now," he asked, as he presented it to her, "don't you think that such abstinence as mine deserves some acknowledgment? I have a mind to renew my request, once ignored."

"What request?" she asked, with a slight return of suspicious incertitude, as if she found it hard to believe that this plausible young man could really have no ulterior motive.

"Only a pansy blossom!" he sung, in a bari-

tone which seemed to be not wholly without cultivation, unless nature had favored him in music as she seemed to have in most else.

Then dropping back into the conversational tone:

"What is the name of the flower? I ought not to lose the opportunity to take back some botanical specimens with me—don't you think?"

"Your charming picture deserves a better return," she said, withdrawing the flower from her button-hole, and presenting it to him.

"I consider it a good bargain," he returned, "loth as I confess I am to part with the portrait."

She made no reply to this bit of gallantry; neither did she resent it.

"And now," pursued Charley, "I ought to have something to show for this visit—to inquiring friends, I mean; so I will jot down a bit of landscape; and, if you will favor me by waiting, you shall pass criticism on it."

In his off-hand way he dashed off, not one, but two scenes; and that which she liked the more he insisted on her accepting.

Finally, after a momentary vacillation, the girl extended the portrait which he had first made, and with flaming cheeks said:

"I will exchange with you—if you—care for—this! It is a pity to rob you of all."

Then the reporter did a very handsome thing. He took off his hat, with that sudden assumption of seriousness which had been so effective before, and said:

"Miss Champney, I have unexpectedly—I hope not altogether undeservedly—secured two chief prizes at a single drawing—your picture, and your confidencé! It will not be uncomplimentary to say that, much as I value the former, I shall be even more solicitous to preserve the latter."

"I believe that it is not misplaced," she said, looking him timidly in the face.

And then a surprising thing took place—equally unexpected to both of the participants in this scene.

Cheeky Charley—blushed scarlet!

If the girl could have read her companion's thoughts at that moment, her wonder would have turned into amazement.

"What an infamous scoundrel I am degenerating into!" ran his thoughts. "My own mother would repudiate me, if she knew. If it were a man, it would be bad enough. But the betrayal of a woman's confidence!"

What, to her, could have been the meaning of such reflections, in one who had manifested only gentlemanly consideration from the first?

As it was, his embarrassment only added to her confusion. It was natural that she should interpret it as the outward manifestation of a sentiment responsive to that which made her own heart beat so high, her frame tremble, her cheeks glow.

She was not a little relieved when, with an affectation of careless laughter he said:

"But time goes on apace! I have a walk of twenty miles between me and my bed, if I miss the return coach. It was rather addle-pated for me to run such a risk, by coming out here without a horse. Till we meet again!"

And lifting his hat, he took a hasty leave, as if, in the embarrassment of the moment, he forgot the necessity of ascertaining where he was likely to find her.

The fact was, that, under the prick of shame, Charley Kenyon had abandoned one part of the course of action he had marked out for himself, resolving to carry forward the business that had brought him into this country without further implication of the girl who had disarmed him by reposing confidence in him as a friend.

To her, lacking this key to his movements, it seemed unlikely that either hurry or embarrassment should make him forgetful, or cause the sudden abandonment of the wish to know where she lived—after what had passed between them.

Was this, then, a ruse? Doubting her compliance—which, considering the stories he had probably heard about her, he certainly had good reason to doubt—was he seeking to throw her off her guard, with a view to once more essaying his skill at trailing her home?

She turned the tables on him, by following him—to her shame, as well as relief; for he betrayed no such intention as she had suspected.

Making his way directly to the mountain road, without so much as once looking round, he seated himself on the trunk of a fallen tree to await the passing of the coach.

What made the girl's heart flutter, and her cheeks burn, was to observe that he whiled the time of waiting by a close study of the portrait he had drawn of her.

"He is not so mean as I!" she reflected, bitter-

ly. "Why do I suspect him so persistently? He is the soul of honor—a perfect gentleman!"

But this reopened the question of his abrupt departure without the knowledge of her home.

All of a sudden the watcher's heart stood still, so that she fairly reeled with the shock of a new interpretation.

"He loves another!" she panted, seizing a sapling to steady herself, while she pressed her hand upon her heart; "or, at least, he is bound in honor by an engagement. He finds that he is not indifferent in my presence, and so has resolved to keep away from me! He no longer wishes to know where I live; he does not intend to seek me again!"

Here were gentlemanliness and honor with a vengeance! She would have much preferred that he be less scrupulous. Gladly would she have taken her chance of winning him, against this supposititious rival.

Here was just what was needed to fan into a raging flame of passion what might otherwise have been but a passing fancy. After the reporter had climbed to a place beside the stage-driver, to be whirled away on the swaying vehicle, still without a backward glance to show that he cared for a last chance glimpse of the girl in whose society he had whiled a summer day, she ran a good mile, to climb a peak from whose apex she knew she could see the very last of the coach on its way to Seven-up.

Then, when all was lost to vision, and the day, such as had never visited her before, was but a memory, she stood like a statue, outlined against the waning light of the sky, with a stony immobility of pain that transcended any manifestation of grief, and said:

"I am my father's daughter!—he will none of me! What is there left? Only this accursed heritage of hate! Then let it come. I dedicate myself to revenge!"

As if in that resolve she had sold herself to the powers of darkness, and had no more to do with the light, she turned abruptly, and plunged downward into the gathering gloom of the lower mountain.

Meanwhile Charley Kenyon had been received with a heartiness that found no boisterous outward expression, but glowed in the stage-driver's steady gaze, and vibrated in the deep chest-tones in which he said:

"Blowed ef I hain't got ye back ag'in, pardner!"

"To transport to safer quarters, Billy, if that will be any satisfaction to you," laughed the reporter.

"Eh?"

"I am going back to Seaver City with you."

"To night?"

"If you don't refuse to take me."

"But I thought you 'lowed to put up hyar a spell—not to be pokin' my nose into—"

"No offense. I've changed my mind."

"You've seen her, then."

"What!"

"You've seen her, I say."

"What makes you think so?"

"I see it in yer eye."

"Gammon! It's in *your* eye! Ha! ha! ha! That's not a bad joke."

The stage-driver turned his attention to his horses without pressing the matter further. He had had his say. It was not like him to "crowd the mourners."

In his room Charley Kenyon stopped long enough to compare the portrait he had made with a photograph which lay next to that with which he had compared the harsh physiognomy of Sarpent Sam.

"The same—the very same!" he ejaculated. "Ten years have not made so great a change in her. Ab, well! I don't wonder much at the compliance of the sheriff. But she must have been a mere girl, scarcely more than a child—fourteen or fifteen, at most."

Then he knit his brows, with a return of his old compunction.

"Dirty work—mighty dirty work for Charles T. Kenyon, Esquire!" he growled, putting both photograph and portrait out of sight. "But the end—ah, that's the justification of every rascal, with a glimmering of self-respect left in him, since the world began! Yet, what can I do? If one must be sacrificed, had it not better be the evil-doer? She is a sinner—confound her!—with all her beauty."

Then, the expression of his face changing, he said softly to himself:

"My darling! My darling!"

Down in the saloon, as he was passing out to the waiting coach, he ran upon Sassy Sol, and seized him with the same quick motion with which he had secured him before.

"Here, you little scalawag!"

"Lemme go! lemme go!" cried the lad, writhing to free himself. "What do you want o' me? I hain't done nothin' to you."

"Do you know how to lie if you get caught in a scrape?" demanded the reporter.

To the ragamuffin of Seven-up this sounded like the preliminary to a business proposal; so he at once submitted himself to his captor, and grinning up into the face, chanted in reply a stave of satirical doggerel through his nose.

"Oh, no!
I'm rather slow,
Thar ain't no go
In yer Uncle Jol
I ain't a bit fly!
I never could lie!
An' all the pie
I'd take on the sly
Ye could put in yer eye!
I hope to die!"

"Come! come! that'll do!" interrupted the reporter, shaking the poet, to fetch him to a full stop. "Do you want to go along with me?"

With him!—with the man who had braved Serpent Sam's rattlers, and become the talk of the camp in consequence!

"You bet!" replied Sassy Sol, with the promptness and utter disregard of possible consequences which marks the born Bohemian.

Stopping for no further preliminaries in the way of business arrangement, Cheeky Charley dragged his little henchman along, and tossed him into the coach with as little ceremony as if he had been a grip-sack.

Billy Boston took in this proceeding, out of the corner of his eye, but ventured no remark.

Not more than half an hour behind the coach, as it bowled along through the darkness on its way to Seaver City, rode a man and woman. The former had the colossal figure of Serpent Sam; the latter, dressed in dark stuff that blended with the shadows, might have been his daughter.

They made a detour, got ahead of the coach, and rode into Seaver City some time before it.

CHAPTER VI.

"PUTTING HIS FOOT INTO IT."

"WHERE, oh, where in all the wide, wide world is there another such country? Talk of discomforts—miserable bodily privations!—when you can have a feast of soul like this! Look! look, papa! See where that bar of sunshine strikes aslant through the rift between those grand old crags, filling all the canyon with splendor! And the contrast with the gloomy foreground! Isn't it as if heaven were bursting through? Oh, please, please stop the carriage, for just one moment!"

Mellie Maynard gave nearly everybody the benefit of her overflow of soul. If she made an exception, you might depend it was the fault of the person denied.

Look at her fluffy blonde hair; at her clear blue eyes, that at once bespoke your confidence in her innocence and truth; at the polished surface of her cheek, ivory white in response, but warmed with a flitting tinge of color while she speaks; at her delicately chiseled lips, not vividly scarlet, as becomes a brunette, but of a dainty pink, like the palace walls of the chambered nautilus.

Judge Maynard unbent his grizzled brows, whose frown had made many a criminal cringe, and smiled indulgently on his beautiful daughter.

It was not necessary for him to direct the arrest of the carriage. Mellie's wish was law to every one about her. John drew in his horses as a matter of course; and though there was so little of the artist about him that he saw only a black rock with a dash of yellow beyond it, he joined the others in so much of a sympathetic smile as a discreet servant might allow himself.

Clinging to her father's shoulder to steady herself, the girl stood up in the carriage, and gazed with all her rapt soul at this exhibition of nature's sublimity, her lips fallen apart, her breath suspended, her bosom dilated with the emotion that swayed her.

Overburdened at last, she sat down with a profound sigh, averting her face from a scene that had so moved her, and clasping her father's arm to her side, rested her cheek against his shoulder.

"Go on, please," she said, in a low voice. "I can't bear to look at it. It is too much!"

Nobody made any reply to this, John obeying her direction with a light, glancing flick of his whip-lash on the glossy flanks of his off horse.

A very pale lady, with thin, though not pinched lips, who occupied the back seat of the

carriage, gazed at the girl with a languid smile of tenderness, as if sympathizing with her emotion, yet deprecating the abandon with which she had yielded to it. Her mother, a glance proved; the beauty her daughter had inherited, refined, not faded, by invalidism, into an exquisite delicacy, as attractive in its way as the young girl's fresh loveliness.

On his knees in the seat beside her, a boy, yet in knickerbockers, was shouting over the back of the carriage at the occupants of a following vehicle, swinging his hat with an infantile:

"Hooray! hooray! hooray!"

The second party was a merry one, consisting of two very fashionably-dressed young ladies and their attendant gentlemen.

The former had nothing about them requiring description, their frills and flummery, and little airs of affectation being exactly like the corresponding vanities of all their class.

"Miss Cordelia Murchison's 'gentleman friend'—'Gussie,' as she called him—wore a cuff around his neck, and sucked the end of a cudgel; Miss Winnie Claybourne's adorer—Mr. Hugh Dunn—was a short, stocky gentleman, with a double chin, and little to say. His hair was cropped close enough for a prize-fighter, and pompadoured on top, while his rotund body was buttoned up so closely that he seemed to have increased in flesh since coming from the hands of the outfitter.

"Oh, Mr. Framingham!"

"Dear Mr. Nesbit?"

"Chawming Mistah Framingham and adawable Mistah Nesbit!"

The cries came from the ladies, and from Gussie in mimicry. They were addressed to two gentlemen who were dashing by on horseback, in a race for the leading carriage.

Each had a lot of hastily-gathered flowers, to which one had added a vine with vividly scarlet blossoms, which trailed over his arm.

So hurriedly, indeed, had these treasures been culled, that they dropped from the grasp of the racers, more intent on precedence than on their overflowing riches, which strewed the ground after them.

They were both young men, with no unusual characteristics. Framingham was ruddy and sandy; Nesbit was small and dark. They were rivals for Miss Mellie's favor, though everybody knew that Charley Kenyon led them by a length—his length, the standing joke went, since he was taller and of more imposing presence than either of them.

"Isn't it a burning shame," lisped Miss Cordie, with the sort of pout that was peculiarly becoming to her, as it protruded her nether lip till it looked, as Gussie told her, like a "strawbeehwy," "to pass us without a single flower! I'll remember Nollie Framingham for that!"

"Oh, don't! I pway you, forget him!" pleaded Gussie. "Would you dwive me to desephwation? I assuah you, Othello, even as Salvini wendahs him, is nothing to me when I'm jealous."

"Oh! you!" returned Miss Murchinson, giving her infatuated slave a "killing" look from under her eyelids. "You wouldn't care a bit—you know you wouldn't!"

"Would you have me pwotest, heah, in the cahwage? Hugh, deah boy, lend me your hand-kehchief to pwotect the knees of my twowsehs, while I sweah—"

"Oh, Mr. Wait! Are you going to swear?" cried Miss Claybourne, putting her hands to her ears with affected dismay. "Don't let him, Hugh—ah—Mr. Dunn, I mean!"

Dunn looked at Gussie, who was making exaggerated preparations for his pledge of passion, and the only response he could find handy was a dull:

"H'm!"

Meanwhile the racers had dashed up to the foremost carriage, one on either side.

"Miss Maynard, your devoted slave!" shouted Framingham, throwing flowers and vine in a confused mass into the carriage, so as fairly to deluge the object of his gallantry in a shower of fragrance and color. "Victory!" he cried, in the next breath, looking back over his shoulder, as he dashed by, unable to check the speed of his horse all at once.

His headlong course occasioned a great careering of the carriage horses, so that for a moment all was commotion.

Nesbit, who had been forced to take the side opposite to that on which Mellie sat, or to follow ingloriously at the heels of his successful rival, made the most he could of an adverse situation, by attempting to regain by discretion what he had lost in the race.

Pulling up his horse at the side of the carriage,

he tendered his flowers with a bow as composed as he could command while out of breath.

"Miss Mellie, if you will accept these from my hand, I would not exchange my chagrin for Mr. Framingham's triumph. Believe me, it is not I that was the laggard, but my horse."

"Oh, Mr. Nesbit, and you, Mr. Framingham!" exclaimed Mellie, receiving the tributes with an exquisite shyness. "It was a shame to have you attend to that foolish wish of mine. I never dreamed of your being to so much trouble, and even risking life and limb—"

"Risk!" broke in Framingham, in his headlong way, having got his horse checked by this time and wheeled back to the carriage door. "If I had had you with me in Switzerland, last year, I would have run some risk, in getting you the famed edelweiss, that would have been worth speaking about."

"I have not the advantage of experience in Alpine climbing," said Nesbit, in his turn, making a point very quietly; "but I am sure I would do more than this to gratify you."

Mellie covered the embarrassment this gallantry in the presence of her parents caused her, by assuming an air of unconcerned gayety.

"You are a couple of naughty boys!" she declared; "and I shall be careful, in future, how I speak of flowers growing half way down precipices that it makes one shudder to recall. I supposed that you had only gone for the columbine. But these daisies and wild-brier, away down there on that dreadful ledge—I would not have let you go, if I had imagined that you could be so foolish."

"Not foolish, but one of its synonyms, Miss Maynard!" laughed Framingham, into whose rattle brain flashed the correspondence of the word "fond;" and it was like him not to withhold it even in the presence of the grave *paterfamilias* himself. "Meanwhile, allow me to repair the effects of my haste."

And swinging from the saddle to the step of the carriage, he began to gather up the flowers he had strewn pretty much over everybody in it.

He had a very active, if not altogether desirable, assistant in Master Fred Maynard, of whose feet, judging from the number of flowers he crushed, it might be well said—"Their name is legion!"

Between them, Miss Mellie soon had a lap full of flowers, none of which, however, could rival, in point of flower-like beauty, the roses in her cheeks.

This was the party of excursionists that drove into Seaver City, followed by two large wagons, one of which was loaded with tents, bedding and other camp equipage, and the other with provisions.

There are a great many disagreeable things in the rude hospitality of the mountain district that these tourists were evidently prepared to avoid.

Notwithstanding its more pretentious title, the entertainment for man and beast in Seaver City fairly justified the criticism of one disgusted sojourner:

"Fair to middlin' fur the beast, but blame rough on the man!"

"This will never do, Emilia," said the judge to his wife, in an undertone, as they inspected what mine host had to offer in the way of a bed, though they were in nowise curious to sample his board. "For my part, I would rather have the bare ground, all to myself, than share that frowsy bunk with its unmentionable myriads!"

"Georgel!" admonished his wife, laying a restraining hand on his arm.

"You can't mean to risk it?" he persisted.

"I thought it would be nice to go back to a bed in a house, if only for one night," said Mrs. Maynard, faintly. "But of course—"

"Of course!" declared Mellie, closing the argument decidedly. "Mamma, we have come out here to build you up, as well as to have a good time ourselves. But how are we to do it, pray, if you constantly thwart our efforts to give you the mountain air in the only way in which it does any good?—through the walls of a tent, to be sure! The idea of going a-gypsying, and sleeping in houses! Come away! come away, to the merry green wood!"

And gayly dancing before her mother, she drew her away by the hand.

So they left the cluster of odorous pine shanties that were destined to serve as the nucleus of a mountain metropolis, some time in the next millennium, possibly, and pitched their tents beyond its gates, out of sight, and out of hearing of all but the loudest yells and the pistol-shots.

Here, on a spot of Mellie's own choosing, close by a crystal spring that sent its streamlet babbling down a dell of delights, as Mellie

called it, they camped, and were soon in the full enjoyment of the creature comforts they had brought along with them.

And here Sassy Sol found them, seeing, himself unseen, and concluding, all things considered, that he could choose a better time and place to execute his mission, than venturing into the midst of so large a company of active-looking young men.

Meanwhile, playing the detective so cleverly himself, as he supposed, it did not occur to Cheeky Charley that he might have reason to be on the lookout for any one spying upon him in turn. Yet it behooved him not to make himself a conspicuous figure in Seaver City, so as to be talked about, and thus, possibly, be brought to the notice of some member of the judge's party.

His first precaution, on arriving at that embryo metropolis, was to effect a complete change in his outward appearance, so that he could move about without attracting attention by any singularity of dress.

He was soon rigged out in a flannel shirt and a slouch hat, so that his nearest friend might have passed him without recognition, if he did not get a fair look at his face.

Even so, he moved about as little as possible, and allowed himself a view of the judge's party only from a safe distance.

But this was an unlucky indulgence. At sight of Mellie, he lost his head. He must see her and hear the sound of her dear voice, at any cost short of self-disclosure.

A hundred times he promised himself that he would not disturb her by letting her guess that he was nearer than the Pacific Coast, where she and all the others supposed him to be.

"I will go out to their camp, and hover about in the darkness, just to get the chance to hear her sing, and to see her dear face in the firelight. There will be not the least danger of discovery. I am glad, now, that Sol didn't risk giving that note in the camp. Nothing can happen to-night. I myself will stand on guard till daylight."

He went, just as we all go where we ought not to; and one that he never dreamed of, followed him!

And who was it trailing his footsteps? Who but Black Bess!

Honestly, as she supposed, she had torn every thought of him out of her heart, before, she assured herself, it had had time to gain a lodgment there.

But at sight of him in Seaver City, the mad surge of feeling that swept over her revealed, in lines of fire, the fact that her dedication of herself to revenge was nothing more than a verbal one, so far as the exclusion of other and tenderer sentiments was concerned.

By an unlucky chance she saw Charley while he was looking at Mellie Maynard from afar; and the expression of his face, and his involuntary gestures, told her his secret more plainly than words could have done.

"She! she!" panted the jealous watcher. "It is that tow-headed creature! What can he see to admire in such a bleached specimen of humanity as that? How I hate her! If it had been that other"—with her eyes on Miss Claybourne—"there might have been some reason in it. But that—that—Albino! She ought to be in a museum!"

By all of which it must not be argued that Black Bess was at all blind to the sylph-like loveliness of the judge's daughter. On the contrary, she was keenly alive to it. It is not unusual for people to admire that which contrasts most strongly with themselves; and Black Bess secretly thought Mellie Maynard the most exquisitely beautiful person she had ever seen.

And such taste as her dress displayed! A woman, Black Bess knew all about that, by instinct.

From the moment he saw Mellie Maynard, Cheeky Charley walked the earth as a man with his head in the clouds, with but the one idea, that he was not to make himself conspicuous. But, alas! it was also necessary that he look about him with intelligence; and because he did not, it was the easiest thing in the world for Black Bess to keep track of him.

So she followed him out to the camp of the excursionists, he never dreaming of anything under the moon save only sweet Mellie Maynard!

CHAPTER VII.

A STOLEN INTERVIEW.

As Charley Kenyon had supposed, the excursionists were entirely without apprehension. It never seemed to occur to any of them that precautions of any kind were necessary.

Mellie, especially, was so used to the country,

that she felt as much at home out in these wilds as if she had been in the quiet village where her father's country-seat was located.

It was a bright moonlight night; and this creature, brimming over with sentiment, longed to be alone in the dreamy effulgence with her own thoughts.

Unchecked, she stole out of the circle of the firelight, to follow the rippling water of the streamlet to a nook which she had picked out before the night fell.

Here, on a mossy mound, with the thread of liquid silver making soft music at her feet, she sat her down, half in light, and half in shadow.

As luck would have it, Charley Kenyon had approached the camp from this side, so that she came directly toward him.

He was standing in dense shadow, out of the way that any one would be likely to pass, following the stream; so he stood stock-still, almost holding his breath, while she passed so near that he could have made her hear in a whisper.

Seating herself as has been described, the girl at once drew from her bosom a photograph, which she pressed to her lips, and then to her cheek, with a low, crooning murmur of tenderness.

This was the last touch, if anything, indeed, was needed beyond her mere vicinity. After this the lover was not accountable for anything he might do. Discretion was cast to the winds. He only knew that the delight of his heart was where he could put his hand upon her.

His pulses leaped. An ecstasy of passion set every nerve atingle, and made every muscle quiver like a harp-string. He must touch her hand; he must gaze into her eyes; he must feel her warm breath on his face; he must hear her once—only once!—pronounce his name. Then he would go away. He would not agitate her. He did not ask to hold her in his arms; to feel her warm lips on his; to have her cling to him, as she had done at that parting which would have broken her heart, but for her strong faith in him—faith that in the end he would compel her father's admiration as he had constrained her love. In short, he proposed to do, and leave undone, what no thoroughly sane man would ever dream could be done and left undone, with one and the same person, at one and the same time.

But what lover is thoroughly sane? None worthy the name!

The girl gazed at the picture, and sighed, and murmured tender nonsense to it, and laughed in delicious joyousness at her own folly—as the world calls it.

"Oh, Charley-boy!" he heard her say, "if you were here! I would give—I would give— Oh, what? What would I give to have my own true love beside me? In such a perfect night, with all the fairies waiting for midnight, so that they can come forth and dance in the moonlight—Ha! ha! ha! how impatient some of them must be, with all this moonlight going to waste! But what would I give? Are any of you little creatures listening? I would give—I would give—"

But her head drooped lower and lower, and her cheeks flamed scarlet at the thought that arose in her mind, and trembled on her lips.

The listener could endure this no longer. With his head swimming, he broke silence.

"Mellie! Mellie! what would you give?" he whispered.

The girl started violently, gazed about in alarm, and then dropped her face in her lap, in an ecstasy of shame that the tenderest sentiments of her heart had been surprised by some one who would make sport of them.

She thought it was one of the gentlemen of the party. She was as angry with him, whoever he might prove to be, as it was in her gentle nature to be with any one; but she was so overcome with humiliation that for the present she could not look into his face.

"Mellie, dear Mellie! don't you know me? It is I!" breathed the lover, as if there could be but one "I" in the world.

In that he was not so far wrong. There was but one for her. She knew who it was, notwithstanding the incredibility of his presence so many miles from where she had supposed him to be.

"Hush! hush!" he breathed, as she pressed her hand to her heart, and her lips fell apart. "Not a sound! You will betray me! My darling! May I come to you? Can you bear it now? Mellie!"

The last was breathed into her ear. He had kept coming, while he craved the privilege. He wouldn't have been much of a lover if he hadn't. His arms were about her. He felt her trembling in his embrace, as she yielded herself to him.

"Not yet! not yet!" she whispered, as his lips hovered so close to hers that there could be no doubt that his pledges to himself of a moment ago were but ropes of sand.

She let her head sink upon his shoulder, turned her face toward his neck, and so rested in perfect quiescence.

But it was joy enough for the lover, to feel the warm tears in which the excess of her emotion spent itself. They were the tears that sweeten life, instead of leaving the scars of their acrid course on the tablets of memory.

And in this moment of ecstatic abandonment, neither felt the eyes that blazed upon them the baleful lightnings of a jealous woman's hate!

"Oh, Charley!" murmured the girl at last, "how imprudent—how terribly imprudent!"

"Could I keep away from you, my darling?" was his only plea.

And what need had he for more? Could any other be more eloquent—in her ears?

"But my father!—what would he say, if he knew?"

"Ask your mother, dear, what her father would have said, under similar circumstances."

Than which, what argument could have contained more in the same space?

Its effect was apparent, in that his ladylove, who till now had submitted passively to his embrace, threw her free arm about his neck, and strained him to her.

"You are the same saucy fellow!" she said, with a low laugh. "I shall never be able to train you up in the way you should go."

"And here I thought I was going—or rather, coming—in just the way to please you!"

"You have transported me, and broken my heart, at the same time!"

"Broken your heart? Mellie!"

"Shan't I have to part with you all over again, stupid?"

"A hundred times, my dear! Once for every time I get a chance to see you."

"And do you fancy, sir, that I will consent to have clandestine meetings with you?"

"Mellie, is it possible—"

"That you haven't conquered my self-respect, along with all the rest of me? Do you want to, Charley?"

There was a reflective pause; and then the lover said, with a marked change in his voice—that sudden assumption of gravity which had subdued Black Bess:

"No, Mellie; I do not. I would not poison all our future with the reflection that I had led you into systematic deception of your parents. Of course I was beside myself, to think of so unendurable a role for you. But you are not responsible for this meeting; and I am willing to take the odium of it upon myself, and make the most of it while it lasts."

He was laughing again—a trick he had of always covering his true depths of feeling with a mask of satire.

But he got his reward for the soundness of heart that always showed itself when occasion demanded, by the gliding of the other arm about his neck, and the spontaneous approach of the lips that till now had been withheld—not from lack of tenderness, but in maiden delicacy.

"Oh, Charley!" they whispered, "if there is anything that can make me love you more than when you—you—lose yourself, dear!—ha—ha!—it is when you find yourself again! I always know you will, in the end."

But alas for their absorption in each other; and alas that the bank of that streamlet should have been carpeted so deep with yielding moss!

The first footstep they heard was almost directly upon them; and it was accompanied with an ejaculation of astonishment that showed they were discovered.

With a low cry of dismay, Mellie tightened her clasp on her lover, and hid her face in his breast. She had no doubt that there was to be a disclosure, followed by a scene that would wrench her heart-strings almost past endurance.

Her parents, whom she loved beyond expression, against the man about whom all the tendrils of her loving heart were entwined!

But they could not tear her from him, when they saw that it would be uprooting all the garden of her life, leaving only a barren waste of miserable endurance.

She would make a desperate fight for her happiness, between these conflicting loves. They who had done so much in the careful nurture of her life, should see that, without their reconciliation, all that had gone before would pass for naught. They should see that they might destroy their own handiwork, but they could never, never affect her love!

She who had seemed a thing that the winds of heaven might not blow upon too rudely, now de-

veloped a strength of purpose that would test the resolution of even the rock of determination that had stood unmoved in the path of crime.

Charley Kenyon saw at a glance that it was too late to attempt escape. It would be equally futile to try to hide his identity. Miss Maynard had been discovered in the arms of a man with the outward appearance of a miner. Of course it would not be for a moment supposed that he was what he seemed; and his known relations with her would inevitably point him out as the only man who could possibly be in such a relation with her.

He rose to his feet, lifting her with him.

"Mr. Dunn," he said, addressing that gentleman with the severe dignity the occasion demanded, "I presume I need not introduce myself to you otherwise than by the sound of my voice."

"You need not," replied Hugh Dunn, with equal coldness.

Where sentiment had led Mellie Maynard to wander in the moonlight, Hugh Dunn's phlegmatic disposition naturally led him to seek solitude, quite irrespective of the moon. Hence his inopportune presence.

"Nor need I explain to you that, pending the approval of her parents, I regard the lady you find in my company in the light of my future wife."

"That is sufficiently apparent."

"I beg your pardon, then, for suggesting that, according to the code current among gentlemen, this is hardly a case for outside interference."

"You are kind enough to think that I need reminding of such a code," answered Dunn, with a natural touch of asperity. "Excuse me if I find it necessary to call your attention to a fact which, under the circumstances, you may justly, perhaps, claim indulgence for overlooking—the fact that I am a guest, and as such have duties, also prescribed by the code to which gentlemen are amenable, to my host."

"I think that that can be adjusted consistently with your sense of what is due yourself. I have already had pointed out to me, by the lady herself, the impossibility of a repetition of the meeting with which I have surprised her. I need hardly tell you that her will is my law in this matter, even if I had not come to see the indiscretion of my conduct—not wholly without mitigation, however, as I hope some day to be able to show you. As, then, the disclosure of what you have seen cannot reclaim the past, and can give nothing but unpleasantness as to the future, I hope you will find it possible to construe your duty with a liberality which will spare the person whom you have it in your power to wound most deeply."

This was a very clever way to put the case. It was a question whether he should strike Mellie Maynard a blow to the heart!

A weak woman might have traded on her beauty, by adding her plea to this appeal. Few men can adjust the scales of honor with any great nicety, when the tears and soft pleadings of a beautiful woman are thrown into the balance over against the law.

Mellie Maynard lifted her face from her lover's breast—without unwinding her arms, however—and fixed her blue eyes on Hugh Dunn's gloomy face.

There was no design in this; nor was she conscious of any effect it might have. It was only that she hung breathless on his decision. She was too proud to ask any man to sacrifice his honor to spare her no matter what degree of pain.

"With the assurance which you have given me, I think I may rest content," answered Dunn, "I am sorry to have intruded upon you. I will bid you good-evening."

Too proud to add that the intrusion was wholly unintentional, as he had had no knowledge of Mellie's absence from the camp, nor any warning of the vicinity of the lovers till he stumbled actually upon them, he was backing off with a bow, when Charley arrested him with his wonted impulsive cordiality.

"Not till I have thanked you, Dunn, from the bottom of my heart, and asked you to wait and allow Miss Maynard to return in your company."

And he extended his hand with a heartiness that could not but dissolve the ice of formality that had formed between them in that trying interview.

"I will walk on down the stream," replied Dunn, in a much softer voice, as he returned the warm pressure of Charley Kenyon's hand; "and when you are ready for me, you can let me know as you pass."

"Well, now! would you have believed that?" asked Charley of his sweetheart, when what had

threatened to be so sore a marplot had left them once more to each other. "That old fellow has some of the milk of human kindness hidden away somewhere in his anatomy, after all. I hope I may be forgiven for all my past uncharitableness to Miss Claybourne! It is only that she is clearer sighted than the rest of us."

"Oh, Charley, hush!" pleaded his sweetheart.

"If you felt as I do—as if life and everything had just been in awful peril—you could not trifle."

"And do you think I am really in the mood for trifling?" he asked, his voice now vibrating with the emotion he had but dissembled. "If I ever get chance a to repay Hugh Dunn for this, he will not have occasion to believe that I remember it lightly!"

It seemed as if they could never say all that welled up from their hearts, in view of the finality of their separation; but the parting came at last; and when Charley Kenyon passed the silent figure that stood in the shadow further down the stream, with only a hurried grip of the hand and a mumbled "God bless you!" his voice was so husky that the words were scarcely intelligible.

Hugh Dunn was not surprised at not finding Mellie waiting to be accompanied by him back to the camp. When he next saw her—not till the following morning—she was very pale, but otherwise self-possessed.

After one swift glance of gratitude, she avoided his eye; and he spared her by keeping away from her as much as possible.

Not so considerate was another witness of that stolen interview.

The morning had worn away, and the dinner-hour passed, when a woman in a gingham sun-bonnet that hid her face so that little else could be seen but that she was rather Gypsy-looking, came into the camp with a basket of berries to sell.

And from under that convenient bonnet, seen only in flashes and glimpses, gleamed the deadly hatred of Black Bess.

CHAPTER VIII.

SASSY SOL EXECUTES HIS MISSION.

SASSY SOL did not find his opportunity till the afternoon of the following day, when, after quite a display of skill at bushwhacking, he came upon the judge in solitude, whipping a trout stream.

Approaching with the affected awkwardness of a country lout, he was repelled by the angler with a frown of annoyance.

"Hey, there, boy! It will do you no good to be hanging around here. Make off with you!"

But instead of obeying, Sol took one hand from his pocket, dragged the sleeve across his nose, and then returned it, to stand staring at the judge with the direct, animal curiosity of a rustic, calm in the security of the distance that intervened between him and the irate fisherman.

Frowning, and muttering something that need not be transcribed or laid up against him, the judge moved on up the stream.

The boy followed, keeping the same vantage of distance, as if an invisible bond bound him to the object of his curiosity, like his shadow.

"Confound you!" cried the judge, at last, "if you don't make off, and cease annoying me, I'll see if there is any virtue in a gad of a suitable size for your legs!"

Sol looked down at his unhandsonely clothed shanks, as if to take their measure in the indicated relation.

Then he looked at the frowning gentleman, and to his astonishment hailed him.

"Say, mister!"

"You young rascal!" cried the judge, indignantly.

"Be you a jedge?" asked Sol, quite unmoved by the epithet that had been hurled at him.

"I am a judge of good birch!" replied Judge Maynard, looking about in that threatening way which is more of a menace than a serious quest.

"So be I," Sol could not refrain from retorting, though this was somewhat out of character with the role of rustic simplicity he had assumed. "I've tasted enough of it!"

"You'll be a better judge still before long, if you don't clear out. What do you want to follow me about for? Haven't you ever seen any one fishing before?"

"Not with sich a geewhillikins-cracker pole as that thar, gov'nor!"

"Come! I'll give you a quarter if you will go away."

"Pitch us yer quarter."

Judge Maynard took the money out of his pocket, and said:

"Come and get it."

"Ugh—ugh!" grunted Sol, with a knowing shake of the head.

"Well, then, plague take you! take it, and clear out!"

And the judge threw the money at the pest.

Sol caught it with the expertness of a dog snapping at a piece of meat.

"Hi! I reckon you've got a pile o' that thar stuff. Ef you sling it around permiskus like, I'll come back ag'in to-morrer fur some more."

"If you do, I'll shoot you!"

But that little touch altered the judge's mood, and he laughed.

Sol laughed, too, in sympathy.

"Aren't you going to keep to your bargain?" asked the judge, while he readjusted his fly.

"Oh, yes! But say?"

"Well?"

"You ain't sich a bad sort, when you're on yer Sunday-best behavior."

As he talked, Sol's native insolence kept coming more and more to the surface; but instead of being annoyed, the judge was rather interested in him. It was the dull, beast-like stupidity of the curiosity he had affected, that had made him a thorn in the side of the man who did not like unintelligence.

"Thank you," he said.

"What's your handle?" asked Sol, abruptly.

"My name, I suppose you mean?"

"That's the ticket, judge. Let us have it, an' give it to us straight."

"I'll try to be truthful," answered the judge, seeing that that there was nothing for it but to humor the boy, and beginning to be willing to study him as a curious development of that wild life. "I am called Judge Maynard, at home."

"Is that so? Honor bright!"

"Honor bright!"

"Waal, I reckon you're the chap I'm lookin' fur."

"Eh? What? Looking for me?"

"Ef you was Jedge Lynch, now, it 'u'd be differ'nt."

"I suppose so. But what do you mean by saying you are looking for me?"

"I mean jest what I say. I al'ays do."

"What are you looking for me for, then?"

"I've got a letter fur ye."

"A letter for me?"

"Straight as a string! All in writin'."

"Most letters are in writing. But where did you get a letter for me; and why don't you hand it over?"

"Say!"

"Well?"

"Will ye gimme a dollar fur it—a hull dollar?"

"Give you a dollar, you young blackmailer!"

"I'll pass your quarter back, ef you will."

"Thank you! I'll see your letter first."

"Now ye see it!" said Sol, flashing a crumpled piece of brown paper into view from somewhere in his raglan; "an' now ye don't see it!" flashing it back again, with a grin.

"What is that you have there?" asked the judge, his curiosity piqued.

"A letter, I told ye."

"For me?"

"You bet!"

"For Judge Maynard? You are sure?"

"Fur Jedge Maynard. I'm sure as shootin'."

"Then give it to me, at once!"

"Gimme a dollar, an' I will. Come, jedge! You've got piles an' slathers of 'em salted down, to home—you know ye have; an' I hain't got a blasted red, but the quarter you give me jest now."

"If that is really a note directed to me, I'll give you the dollar. But the chances are it is a swindle, like your going away."

"Oh, I'm goin' away fast enough, fur the quarter—"

"Not so very fast, you must admit that."

"But you wouldn't have me go without givin' you the letter, would you?"

"It begins to look like it. Let me see it, you young rascal! Can't you trust me? I say I will give you the dollar, if it is really a note to me."

"Ef your name is on it?"

"Yes."

"Waal, I'll let you see the name."

Sol reproduced the paper—a soiled bit of wrapping-paper—and tore off a part of it.

"Thar's your name," he said, sticking the scrap on a bush; "an' you kin see the rest when you come down with the dollar. Pay as ye go, an' then ye won't owe! That's good enough gospel fur anybody."

And he hastily backed off, as the judge advanced to satisfy the curiosity now fully aroused.

"The paper bore the inscription:

"JEG MANURD."

The writing was exceedingly awkward—a fact which will presently be accounted for.

"Why, what is this?" exclaimed the judge.

"I supposed it was from one of my party."

"Nary party," responded Sol. "Another party."

"Where did you get this from?"

"Gimme the dollar, an' see fur yerself."

The dollar was tossed as the quarter had been, whereupon Sassy Sol stuck the remainder of the paper on the nearest bush and took to his heels.

Still further mystified, the judge hastily possessed himself of the paper, and glanced first at the signature, to see who his strange correspondent might be.

The note was subscribed:

"A friend in need."

An anonymous note! What could it mean?"

The judge had had enough to do with crime all his life to know that an anonymous note means mischief of some kind—usually mischief of the writer's making.

But the important thing was to get hold of the writer, who dared not show himself.

Without stopping to read, the judge set about the getting of some clew.

"Hallo, boy! Look here! Wait! I want to speak to you!"

But Sol had evidently got all he wanted. He showed only his heels.

Now, Judge Maynard had been an athlete in earlier days, and though sitting on the bench had put him out of condition by adding considerably to the load he had to carry, and in many other ways he was not so young as he used to be, he had the spirit of battle in him yet. So, making a great hue and cry, in the hope of attracting assistance, he set out in full career after the runaway.

Sassy Sol had taken the precaution to approach his intended victim from such a direction that he was now running away from the camp, and the idea of a man of the judge's proportions catching such a greyhound of starvation as himself only "tickled his fifth rib."

In vain did the pursuer draw a revolver, shouting after the nimble fugitive:

"Stop! stop! or I fire!"

In vain did he make good the letter, though not the spirit, of his threat, firing in Sol's direction, though of course not at him.

"I'll give his pussy highness a mite of a run, jest to stimulate his appetite," laughed the boy, keeping just far enough ahead not to discourage the chase.

But, the best-laid plans o' mice an' men gang aft a-gleel. Alas for our Ariell he had not learned that the battle is not always to the strong, nor the race to the swift; he had not taken to himself the wisdom of the adage:

"There's many a slip betwixt the upper lip and the dipper!"

In the light of his glee, what was his consternation to hear his pursuer shout:

"Framingham! Framingham! head off that young rascal for me! Stop him! stop him!"

And to his dismay, Sol found himself rushing headlong into the arms of a very determined-looking young man—the very one whose active build had contributed largely to determine him from taking the chance of capture by delivering his note in the enemy's camp.

Framingham hastily leaned his rifle against a tree, and prepared to receive what he jumped to the conclusion was a pilferer.

A fugitive reasons quickly. Here was a fine young man from the city, all tricked out in sporting costume. He might be a good runner—he looked like it. But the question was—would he soil that immaculate suit without a moment's hesitation; or would his personal appearance count for something to him?

Quick as a flash, Sassy Sol leaped into the brook, quite regardless of his raglan, which, by the way, would be none the worse for a washing.

But what he could not be expected to reckon on, for want of knowledge, was the fact that Oliver Framingham was desperately in love with Mellie Maynard; so that, though it was true he thought with a pang of the hunting-suit in which he had been disporting himself for her allurements, he was even more desirous of pleasing her father.

A flying leap, with the advantage of being longer than Sol's; then flop, splash, flounder

through the water. It was like a big fish after a little one. Sassy Sol lost by that operation.

Then out, and away! How Sol's heels did fly! But he had after him a man who knew enough to keep his mouth shut, and his clinched hands up at his shoulders.

How it might have ended, there is no knowing; for Sol was a good one. But all of a sudden he heard a voice saying, mildly:

"Not so fast, my little man!"

And, as if out of the earth, there arose directly in his path the figure of Hartley Nesbit.

His appearance was so sudden and unexpected as he arose from a bush behind which he had secreted himself on seeing Sol take to the water to cross over to his side of the stream, that it was impossible for the fugitive to deflect his course, or check his headway.

Plunged into the arms of Mr. Nesbit he plunged, to be infolded in an embrace from which there was no escape, though he writhed like an eel.

"Gently! gently!" admonished the captor. "I am the crack wrestler of my class; and can hold the devil and all his angels!"

Sol soon found that he could hold him, at all events; and that was amply sufficient.

CHAPTER IX.

A SLIPPERY CUSTOMER.

"EVERY dog has his day!" quoted Nesbit, with a knowing smile at the dripping and chagrined Framingham. "Yours yesterday: mine to-day. How do you feel about it, chum?"

"My ardor is considerably damped," confessed Framingham, taking the chances of fortune good-humoredly.

Judge Maynard came up, puffing and blowing.

"The little scoundrel gave you a run," observed Nesbit. "What has he stolen?"

"Stolen? Nothing, except my self-esteem. He has outwitted me from first to last," laughed the judge, looking at the captive not without admiration.

"Outwitted you?"

"You don't know him yet. You'll get over your surprise on better acquaintance. Look sharp after him till I glance over this paper. He's a slippery customer, I tell you, in more ways than one."

"He'll not give me the slip—at any rate, not without teaching me some new trick."

"Say, judge," pleaded Sol, apparently very much frightened, "you ain't 'lowin' fur to lambaste me, be ye? I hain't done nothin' to you. An' I wouldn't be so mean as to make a row about a dirty dollar ef I had your scads. I wouldn't so!"

But the judge was busy with his note. It did not please him, for he knit his brows as he spelled it out.

The writing was so scraggly that its perusal was like riding on a corduroy road. And no wonder, for Sassy Sol might have said of it, with more truth than was usual with him:

"This is a specimen of my handwriting."

"DEAR JUDGE," it ran, "keep yure wether optick peeled fur squawly wether. Navvyho Nat is after you bigger'n a house. Heaze planted all the jury what give him the neck stretcher in his privit berry-in'-ground, an' heaze got a soker in pickle fur you, you bet. Ef I wuz you I'd cut the country. That tharze the only way fur to save your bakun. Ef you don't no whoo Navvyho Nat is lately, you ask after Sarpent Sam. Heaze the boy you've got to look out fur. Give him a wide burth. That's his noo handle. Heaze layin' fur you I no. I ain't givin' myself away, but I don't want you to git hurt. So no more from your truly. A frend in need is a frend indeed, as the Good Book says, an' ef you stick a pin thar you'll be all rite."

"Poseskip don't give me away."

From this scrawl the judge looked up at Hartley Nesbit's captive, with the frown he was in the habit of cowing the prisoner at the bar with.

"Can you read writing?" he demanded.

"No, sir," answered Sassy Sol, without the quiver of an eyelash, though the truth was the note under examination was not only his veritable handiwork, but to a considerable extent his literary composition.

It had occurred to Charley Kenyon that, in order to have the thing thoroughly in character, it might not be a bad plan to let Sol try his hand at it, after thoroughly posting him as to what was to be done. The event proved that this piece of wisdom was like giving a horse his head on a dark and dangerous road.

"And you haven't read this?" continued the inquisition.

"No, sir. But I kin read print some."

The boast came in like the fullness of statement of a witness who is anxious to leave

nothing unsaid that can have any bearing on the case.

"How did you know my name from the rest of it?" demanded the judge, sharply.

"Why, it was at the top—an' then he told me," answered Sol, with every appearance of simplicity.

"Did he tell you what was in here?"

"No, sir."

"And you didn't know, for yourself?"

"No, sir."

"Now, who told you? That is to say," corrected the judge, "how long have you been livin' with him?"

"Livin' with him? Who? I hain't been livin' with nobody! I've been livin' all alone by myself, on what I kin pick up."

"Where do you live?"

"Oh, anywheres. I've been knockin' around up to Seven-up. But I'm down byar now."

"Down where?"

"Why, to Seaver City."

"Well, who gave you this note?"

"A man. I don't know him. I never see him before."

"Did he pay you for fetching this note to me?"

"He gimme a plug o' terbacker."

And fumbling in his raglan, Sol brought to light as disreputable a piece of plug tobacco as ever was displayed in a criminal court.

Nothing else that he could have done would have given such a color of truth to his story.

The judge looked at the note with a meditative frown. It was quite in keeping with Sol's plug.

"You're sure you're not acquainted with this man?"

"No, sir. I never see him before in all my life."

"You would know him if you were to see him again? Wait! Where do you expect to meet him, when you take the answer back?"

"Thar ain't to be no answer."

"How do you know?"

"He said so."

"Just what were his instructions to you?"

"He told me to give that to you, an' then to clear out as fast as my legs would carry me."

"You were very scrupulous about following that out to the letter. Now, let me see if you can be so obedient to me. I want you to find this man; and I will pay you for the service better than with a plug of tobacco. Do you see this money? I will give you ten dollars to point out the writer of this to me."

Sol reflected that he could earn that money very quickly; but his face betrayed nothing of it.

"I'll try to find him," he said; "but I don't know whar to look, no more than you do. I reckon he's in Seaver City somewhar. Oh, I reckon I kin find him," he added, following the hand of the judge, with an eager glance, as it retreated to his pocket, carrying the money out of sight with it.

"Find him, and the money is yours. But first, describe him to me."

Sol shifted his weight from one foot to the other, reflectively.

"Waal, he looks a good deal like most men around byar. He's about as big as you be, only not so big around. His hair is black like his'n," pointing to Nesbit; "but his beard is about the color o' that thar gent's hair," indicating the ruddy locks of Framingham, to his not slight disgust.

The fact was, Sol was building up an ideal character with the materials nearest at hand.

"He had a shirt on," he added—"red, and breeches—waal, I reckon they was about as nigh the color o' mud as anythin' you find. Then he had boots, an' bat, an' I reckon that's about all."

"A very graphic description," observed the judge. "We might hang about four men out of five on such an identification, in this delightful country. But I suppose you can recognize him when you see him."

"Framingham, I wish you would do me a favor."

"Nothing could be more grateful to me, I beg you to believe," protested the favored lover, with effusive eagerness.

"Oh, by the way, you'll want to change your clothes, of course. I thought that you—"

The speaker looked from Framingham to Nesbit, making an evident comparison between them, not to the latter's advantage.

"If I could answer your purpose," put in Hartley, with becoming modesty.

"Oh, hang the clothes!" cried Framingham, with his wonted impetuosity. "What's to be done?"

"But you will take cold—"

"Never in my life!"

"I want this urchin looked after," broke out the judge, with an impatience born of his perplexity. "He may be all right, and he may be all wrong. I don't want to take any chances."

"Look here! I wonder if it wouldn't be a good plan to take advice in this matter. What do you make of this?"

And he submitted the anonymous note to the inspection of the younger men.

They read it together, Framingham looking over Nesbit's shoulder, the judge having banded it to the latter, who happened to be nearest him.

They read it, the judge remarking:

"Ordinarily I should pay no attention to such—"

But—hey, presto!—their prisoner was gone!

He had been standing so quietly, and had so taken the character of an ally, that Nesbit had let go the manacle-like grip on his wrist, and transferred his hold to the back of the neck of the shirt Sol wore.

Ordinarily this would be considered a pretty secure hold on a boy; but Sassy Sol had resources that his captors dreamed not of.

Slipping his hand under the one suspender that supported his trousers, he suddenly threw his arms above his head, and shrunk backward and downward, leaving his shirt in the grip of his captor, with the sleeves turned inside-out, like the skin of an eel.

Back went the "gallus" over his naked shoulder, and he was away like the wind.

Nesbit returned from the momentary diversion of attention that had cost him so dear, with a stare of amazement at the empty garment he held, and another with bated breath after the fugitive.

Then he dashed the useless shirt to the ground, and set after his escaping prisoner with a look that bespoke determination ominous to Sassy Sol.

He even forgot to yield up the note; but it was safe in his iron grip.

Of course Nollie Framingham was with him, shoulder to shoulder, and the judge brought up the rear, no match for these young athletes.

But Sassy Sol was now ready to give them a taste of his metal. He was in the lead, with nobody to intercept him; and he "ran like a white-head."

Hartley Nesbit might be the champion wrestler of his set; it would have been more to the purpose if he had been the champion runner.

He had pluck and determination; but Sol had the legs.

Hartley had even the chagrin of seeing himself outstripped by Nollie Framingham, at the outset. But it was Nollie who, at the end of half an hour, when Hartley had overtaken him, and was about to pass him, cried:

"Oh, hang it all, Nesbit! ain't it about time for us to pull out of this for a couple of fools! What's the chance of our overtaking that little fiend this side of the Golden Gate? I'm a willing horse as long as there is any show; but he's got the legs of us, I tell you; and I, for one, am dead beat. Here goes to knock off, whether you do, or not."

And Framingham pulled up, and threw himself on the ground out of breath.

Nesbit stopped too, pretty well blown, but good for another half-hour at least.

What discouraged him was, not lack of wind, so much as the conviction that he might run on forever, and never get another sight of the boy who had given him the slip so cleverly.

"It's all well enough for you to say quit," he growled. "It was I that lost him."

"But could you help it, man? Good heavens! nobody would be so unreasonable as to expect you to hold on to his skin. But then, in any event, what's the use of crying over spilt milk? He's gone, and gone for good. Have you any idea where he is? He's as apt to be behind us, as before us. He's been out of sight a good ten minutes. How do you know that he hasn't pulled out of the road, and let us pass, while he laughed to see us go by?"

"I don't know," admitted Nesbit. "But one thing I do know—if I ever get my hands on him again, I'll break every bone in his skin!"

"Tut! tut! tut!—for cutting his lucky when he got the chance? Wouldn't you have done it yourself, if you had been in his place, and had had the wit and dexterity? I tell you that boy's a genius! He'll make his mark in the world before he goes out of it, or I'm no prophet."

"He'll make his mark on the gallows!"

"Come, come, Nebby! there's no use in bearing malice. Life's too short; and then, there's

scarcely anything in the world worth it. Besides, have you more against him than I? Ha! ha! Look at me! But what shall we say to the gov'nor, when he comes up? And what is it all about, anyway? I couldn't make that dirty scrawl out; could you?"

"We didn't have much time. But here it is. I forgot to give it back. Ah! that's a name that hasn't very pleasant associations for Judge Maynard."

And Hartley told the story of the trial and execution of Navajo Nate.

Framingham whistled, and then pronounced the whole thing "rot." He was in too riotous good health to take easily to apprehension.

"If we never have anything to fear worse than men who have once been properly hanged," he said, "I, for one, don't propose to lose much sleep fretting about resurrections. Let's go back."

They returned till they met the judge.

"Well, gentlemen?"

"No go!" declared Framingham, lightly.

"He was winged with an evil conscience; and then, by Jove! he wasn't handicapped with much clothes!"

"Have you read the warning? What do you make of it?"

"A piece of nonsense—don't you think so? Some miserable fellow is paying off an old grudge by trying to spoil the pleasure of your *pasear*."

"Ordinarily, I should give it not a second thought. It is not the first time I have been threatened by criminals and their friends. But this is a wild country, if a man is disposed to square a grudge."

"But you don't suppose the fellow was actually restored to life?"

"No. It is some friend of his, most likely, if anybody at all, other than some one, as you say, who is getting a cheap revenge on me."

"It might be," suggested Nesbit, "that some ruffian pretends to be Navajo Nate, for the sake of notoriety."

"Or some fellow has heard the story, and is amusing himself with a practical joke," proposed Framingham.

"That boy was instructed to avoid capture at all hazards," pursued the judge. "But, come! there is no use in this fruitless speculation. We will not startle the ladies till we are forced to; but it may be well for the men of our party to be put on their guard. For myself I have no great apprehensions; but remember, gentlemen, all that is dear to me in the world is here."

"Don't worry on that account, my dear judge!" cried Framingham, seizing his hand, warmly. "We can act as a bodyguard to the ladies without exciting their suspicions. If we can't, there must have been some want of gallantry in the past."

And he laughed with his imperturbable cheerfulness.

Without disclosing the secret anxiety that was all in their minds, they returned at once to the camp, to find everybody there—but Mellie! Where was she?

CHAPTER X.

IN THE TRAP.

"BERRIES!" cried Mellie Maynard, at sight of what Black Bess had in her basket. "The very thing for tea! How stupid of us not to think of gathering them ourselves!"

"Berry-picking!" exclaimed Miss Murchison, elevating her eyebrows. "How charmingly like being a milk-maid in a quilted silk petticoat, I mean, at a fancy ball!"

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Mellie. "You're too ridiculously superfluous for anything, coz! I shall go out the very first thing to-morrow morning. Won't it be fun? The only absurd thing is the substitution of condensed milk for cream. The idea of being in the country without cows! This is no country at all—in that particular line!"

"But we must reward this good creature for the suggestion, as well as for her kindness in thinking about us. And don't fancy that we will spoil your market by competing with you. No matter how many we pick ourselves, we will buy a basketful of you every day. And you shall show us where they are most plentiful, if you will be so kind."

If anything in the world could disarm a jealous woman, it must have been the engaging manner of Mellie Maynard, as she smiled into Black Bess's face, trying to get a good view of what had excited her admiration.

But, watching her opportunity, when it could be done without the sudden change in Mellie attracting notice, Bess gave a little tug to the girl's dress, and uttered the—to her—magical name:

"Kenyon!"

Mellie gave a start, flushed scarlet, and stared into the face of the stranger.

Bess looked straight into her eyes, with a glance of intelligence, and then turned away.

Of course, after she had left the camp, she had not gone far when she was joined by a trembling, pale-faced inquirer.

"What is it?" quavered Mellie, trying in vain to control her anxiety; for love has a thousand alarms.

"What is what?" asked Bess, affecting ignorance.

"Didn't you give me a signal, a moment ago, that you wished to see me?"

"Will you tell me your name? Are you Miss Maynard?" asked Bess, with the evasiveness of seeming caution.

"Yes! yes! He has sent you to me? Has anything happened? Oh, tell me quickly!"

"It is Mr. Kenyon," answered Bess. "He wishes to see you, and at once. You are not to worry, and above all not to attract any one's attention to him. He can get along without help. It is nothing serious. You are not to feel distressed, and I am not to agitate you, but to fetch you without delay."

"He is hurt! Oh, he is hurt! What has happened? I will get my father. He will know what to do. Everything must be foregone, if my darling is in danger. They love me. I will compel them to yield."

How her face lighted up with resolution! How her graceful, pliant figure straightened and strengthened to meet the emergency! There was no weak yielding to the helplessness of despair. She was all for action. The enemy, in whatever form, must be met and battled against with every resource at her command.

"Nol nol!" objected Bess. "He was particular about that. He feared that, in your anxiety, you would betray him needlessly. I was to assure you that he is in no danger, though in considerable pain."

"Oh, you are breaking it to me gradually! He is dying! Say it—say it! He is dying! Let us hasten. Where am I to go?"

In her despair, Mellie would have rushed off in any direction her guide chose to indicate.

"You are needlessly distressing yourself," insisted Bess, restraining her. "I think Mr. Kenyon is right. He may be laid up for three or four weeks; but beyond that, there is nothing to fear. But you must calm yourself. If we should meet any of your friends, your manner would excite their curiosity; and it would then be impossible for me to take you to the gentleman. He insisted on that before everything else. I was to be careful not to mistake the person, and not to attract the notice of anybody else."

"But what has happened to him?"

"A fall among the rocks. He dragged himself to our house, and then sent me, first for a surgeon who lives at Seaver City, and on my way back, for you."

Making a brave fight for it, Mellie restrained her tears, and all outward manifestations of distress. She was helped in this by the fear of meeting some one from the camp, all of the gentlemen save Gussie being out hunting or fishing.

So Bess led her victim for a distance of over two miles, and into an abandoned hut, which Mellie must have seen at a glance was uninhabited, and indeed uninhabitable, but for the distraction of her wits.

Once in the hut, the roof of which was falling in, she stared about in amazement, and then at her guide.

"But, Mr. Kenyon? He is not here," she exclaimed.

"It will be a long time before he is here," answered Bess, with a complete change of manner, her black eyes now fixed upon Mellie with a malevolence that made the girl's heart stand still.

"But—what do you mean—by—"

"I mean that I've got you, miss; and we can now come to a full understanding as soon as you please."

"But I don't understand you. Why do you look at me so? Who are you; and why have you brought me to this strange place? This cannot be your home. No one could live here. You have deceived me."

"I won't deceive you any longer. Make yourself at home here. You've come to stay."

"But I will not!"

"You won't, eh? Do you see this little toy?" drawing her revolver. "If you doubt my ability to use it with effect, try to make your escape."

"You would not dare to kill me."

"Ha! ha! Maybe I can convince you to the

contrary by telling you why I have brought you here."

"Yes, why have you done anything so wicked?"

"I have the misfortune to be in love with the man who favors you. Now do you doubt my courage to carry out what I have begun so desperately?"

"But you do not mean—"

"On the contrary, that is exactly what I do mean—that you shall never see him again in this world, or he you, unless it be your dead body. You have that at your disposal."

Mellie now stared at her captor with the thought that she must have fallen into the hands of some maniac. That any sane person could become so desperate seemed to her incredible.

"But if I do not attempt to escape," she asked, "what do you purpose to do with me?"

"You will learn that soon enough. I shall not keep you— Ah! not so long as I feared."

"Some one is coming!" panted Mellie. "I will appeal to him against you."

"Do!" laughed Bess. "You'll be the first one that ever thought of such a thing."

And well might she say that; for the approaching footsteps were those of a horse bearing to the hut the least promising man in such an emergency that poor Mellie could have dreamed of.

"Waal," ejaculated Sarpent Sam, as he stopped on the threshold, "what in blazes have you got hyar?"

"You ought to recognize her," answered Bess. "She is his daughter."

"But what be you doin' with her? She ain't nothin' to me. I'm after bigger game."

"She's a great deal to me. For once in a way, I have been hunting on my own account."

"Do you mean to say that you've stole her away from her folks?"

"That's what I mean to say."

Sarpent Sam uttered a round oath, that caused Mellie to start as a flash of lightning might have done.

"Why, blast ye!" he cried, "you're knockin' my game in the head! I ain't ready yet."

"I'm ready," answered Bess, coolly.

"An' what be you 'lowing to do with her?"

"Add her to your specimens."

"Oh, gammon! I ain't fightin' women. You'll turn her loose when I've fetched down my game, ef you hain't flushed it already. Come! we've got to be stirrin'. We'll have to fetch him now, before he finds out she's gone, whether we're ready or not. What in Cain put it into your head to knock my pins off the alley before I got 'em all set up?"

"Simply having a game of my own, which I have decided to play first."

"What?"

"Your game must wait, I say, till mine is played."

"My—game—must—wait?"

Sarpent Sam's amazement showed that his daughter's enterprise was one in which he had no share, and moreover no interest.

"Oh, sir!" cried Mellie, taking advantage of this turn of affairs, "I beg of you, save me from this mad woman! I have never harmed her; yet she has brought me here by a cruel deception, and holds over me the most terrible threats if I try to escape her. My father will reward you for any service to me—"

But neither Sarpent Sam nor his daughter were paying any attention to her. They went on with their contest as if she were not interrupting.

"Your—game—must—wait," retorted Bess, as deliberately as her father had spoken.

"What do you mean?" demanded Sarpent Sam.

"To have my way, for once. Have I, or have I not, served you faithfully for ten years and more?"

"I hain't complainin' about what you have done."

"With very good reason! Well, after having helped you to gratify your hatred for so long without question, the time has come when I demand a return. I have a hate as bitter as yours."

"This hyar girl?"

"That girl there."

"What's she to you?"

"An obstruction."

"I don't understand you."

"It isn't necessary that you should, just now. You shall know when the time comes."

"She says that she is in love with my lover," put in Mellie, "and that she is determined to separate us."

"Oh, go 'way!" cried Sarpent Sam.

And looking at his daughter in surprise, he burst into a ruffianly guffaw.

"Who is the lucky man?" he asked.

"That is nothing to you," replied Bess, angrily.

"It is Mr. Kenyon," said Mellie. "If you will not save me, oh, I beg of you to warn him against her."

"Kenyon? What Kenyon? Why, blast my two eyes into one, ef it ain't his nibs! Bess, you hain't been foolin' with Cheeky Charley? Is your young man's name Charley, my dear?"

"That is his name, sir!" answered Mellie, with an assumption of dignity repellent of his rude familiarity.

"Oh, waal, now! ef you're as gally as he, we'll have trouble with you. You're a gay leetle bantam, an' no mistake."

Then, turning back to his daughter:

"Ef you're foolin' with Cheeky Charley, you're playin' fur high stakes. Take a fool's advice, an' let him alone."

"Are you afraid of him?"

"Waal, that jest depends. I've taken a bird's eye view of his revolver; an' it has a mighty good alignment."

"However that may be, I shall carry out what I have begun."

"You'll have to play a lone hand, then; for I sha'n't give up my layin' fur the old man, fur anythin' on top o' this round earth! I reckon you've cooked my goose with your tomfoolery; but I'm goin' fur him while thar's a single pin up."

Here was an opposing current which Black Bess could not hope to stem. She must make some concession.

"See here!" she said, "we must continue to act together. You help me, and I will help you."

"You help me, an' I'll help you! The only trouble with your proposition is, that it's hind-side before."

"But this girl must be disposed of first. She is already on our hands."

"Knock her in the head, then. That's the quickest way. She ain't no good to you, nor to me. Hyar, I'll do it fur ye, if you're at all squeamish."

And Sarpent Sam reached for Bess's carbine, which stood against the wall, as if to brain their troublesome prisoner with its butt.

"Ah! you would not murder me?" cried Mellie, shrinking from his malignant frown.

"Stop!" said Bess, stepping between them. "I don't propose to leave any remains of her to be found, and betray everything. People always inquire into motives, when a dead body is found. I mean that she shall disappear utterly, and no one ever be able to guess what has become of her, or why she left the camp."

"But what be you 'lowin' to do with her jest now?"

"We will bind and gag her, and leave her here till we have secured her father, if nothing will do you but to proceed at once with his capture."

And this suggestion was acted upon, Mellie finding herself a helpless prisoner, and the night gathering round.

CHAPTER XI.

CAGING THE WRONG MAN.

WHEN Judge Maynard found that all the ladies of his party were in the camp, save only his daughter, his inquiries as to her whereabouts were at first very quiet, so as not needlessly to alarm her mother.

Mellie had been there, certainly not more than an hour before. She must be somewhere about. She was in the habit of wandering in the vicinity by herself, on the lookout for all sorts of curious things of nature's handicraft, and for fine views.

"That's just it," said the judge, taking his cue from this well-known interest of his daughter. "Let us hunt her up. I have found something unique for her to sketch. It will make a pretty sunset, I fancy."

The young ladies joined him gayly, making the woods ring with their calls, trying elocutionary effects, and laughing at one another's failures.

As no response was elicited, it was suggested by Miss Murchison that Mellie must have put her enthusiasm over berry-picking into instant execution, as the last seen of her was shortly after that odd-looking woman visited the camp.

Though this was only a satirical fling, it brought out the story of the berries; and the father looked grave, though he sought to dissemble his feelings.

But this could not long continue. The ladies soon began to remark that it was very odd that

Mellie should stray so far. The theory of a practical joke, with the truant in hiding, laughing at their perplexity, was discussed and rejected.

Then Judge Maynard communicated his anxiety to Hugh Dunn, showing him the anonymous letter.

Hugh could make nothing of the letter, but he persisted in the position he had taken from the first, discouraging the idea that there could be any real cause for alarm. Miss Maynard would come in of her own accord, presently, with her arms full of flowers, or with some new species of insect, or whatnot, that she had picked up.

The fact was, Hugh was beginning to suspect that Charley had broken his promise, and that Mellie was hidden somewhere too near to dare to discover her whereabouts.

But, taking this view of the matter, he could not keep the gloomy disapproval out of his face, and he proved but a Job's comforter.

Before long it was agreed that the gentlemen should go each in a different direction, and scour the whole vicinity in a systematic search.

But when they once more assembled in camp, to see if anything had been ascertained, and the ladies stood about with blanched lips, the anxiety of all no longer disguised, then Hugh took the judge to one side, and communicated what he knew to him.

"I have remained silent so long," he concluded, "in the hope and belief that nothing serious would come of her absence. I now break silence because I begin to fear that I have had too much faith in Mr. Kenyon's integrity."

"Fear," repeated the father, shrinking from what loomed up in his own mind, and preferring to have it first suggested by another. "What do you fear, Mr. Dunn? Speak plainly. What can he have done?"

"But one thing, of course. I fear that he has persuaded Miss Maynard to elope with him."

"Impossible! She would not do it. My Mellie? Oh, no! no!"

Hugh Dunn bowed in grave acquiescence.

"I hope that I am wrong, sir, for all our sakes. Not the least consideration with me is reluctance to find myself disappointed in the high estimate I had formed of Mr. Kenyon. My fears are based on a knowledge of the strong attachment that exists between your daughter and him, and the understanding that you have discouraged his addresses. I beg your pardon for this intrusion."

"Do not think of looking upon it in that light," protested Judge Maynard, seizing the hand of the silent man with warm appreciation. "You are a true friend, Mr. Dunn, and I will act on your judgment."

"Call it my worst fears, sir. My judgment is all the other way. I cannot believe that this would be done deliberately, but in a fit of desperation, and only because the case seemed otherwise hopeless."

But the judge did not stop to listen to Mr. Dunn's refinements. If his daughter was to be saved, it must be by prompt and vigorous action.

In a moment he had communicated to every one the facts as far as known to him, to allay even greater apprehension. Then into the saddle, and away to Seaver City.

It was not long before he had the whole place about him, and it was spread broadcast that a bold abduction had probably been effected.

If many were disposed to smile at this designation of a runaway match, none were indisposed to accept the judge's money, and pursuing parties were organized under the lead of the judge himself, and of the three effective men—Framingham, Nesbit, and Dunn. Nobody thought of Gussie any more than one of the ladies, in this capacity.

But when they were ready to scatter, a man came rushing up with eager intelligence.

"Say, Mister Judge! did you say it was this hyar gally chap they call Cheeky Charley as run off with your girl?"

"His name is Charles Kenyon," answered the judge.

"Then the quicker you make tracks up the road for Seven-up, the sooner you'll be likely to overhaul him. He's sneaked out o' the town, an' give you the slip, not a quarter of an hour ago. Ef I'd knowed what was up, I could 'a' put ye on to him sooner."

"You are sure it was he?"

"Sartin sure. I'll take my Bible affidavit on it."

"Accompanied by a lady?"

"Nary lady. He was goin' it alone fur all he was worth."

A few hurried questions satisfied the judge of the fellow's sincerity, and casual allusion to

Sassy Sol brought out his relation to Charley Kenyon.

Then the distressed father thought he saw it all.

"It is a miserable plot!" he cried. "The villain had this scrawl delivered to me in order to throw us off the track."

The first thing was to capture the abductor. Where he had hidden Mellie could then be forced out of him.

Into the saddle, and away like the wind! The judge and his immediate friends were well mounted, and some of the men of Seaver City had good stuff under them.

As the sun went down, the moon rose, so they had good light for their work.

Half an hour's hard riding brought them in sight of the fugitive. Charley had taken the best horse he could find, which proved far short of his hopes.

He had been knocking about Seaver City, waiting impatiently for the return of his messenger, and wondering if Sassy Sol had proved unequal to his task, when the judge and his friends rode into the place with the intelligence of Mellie's disappearance.

At sight of their troubled faces Charley's heart leaped into his throat. He ran considerable risk of discovery to learn the truth without delay. Then, when he knew that she was gone, he had not the least doubt that this was the blow Sarpent Sam had contemplated.

He would, first, at least, wring the father's heart by robbing him of his daughter.

"Fool!" cried the despairing lover. "Why did I not think of that? Mellie in the power of that fiend!"

There was but one thing to do—to make every effort to intercept the abductor before he got to his horrible mountain den.

If there had been nothing to implicate him, Charley would have discovered himself to the father, and taken a respectable party at his back; but he learned of the cloud of suspicion under which he rested at the same time that he heard of Mellie's disappearance, and feeling that nothing could be so fatal as the delay, if he was not believed, he resolved to do what he could alone.

He soon found that he was pursued, and would eventually be overtaken. The one hope remaining was that he could keep out of the clutches of his pursuers long enough to reach Rattlesnake Ridge. If he was then captured, they would all be on the ground were Mellie's recovery must be effected.

What mattered it that he confirmed the suspicion against himself by the madness of his flight? He plied lash and spur with the greatest desperation of his life.

But, alas for his calculations! In his fear of capture before he had got near enough to the Ridge to induce Mellie's friends, even if they did not fully believe him, to carry out the course he advised, he overtaxed his horse. The animal grew wild, reckless, uncertain in his movements, and finally stumbled and went down with a crash.

Charley Kenyon lay stunned on the road; and his pursuers gathered around him. They believed that they had the head of the plot, and he could not tell them what he had intended to.

Back to Seaver City they carried him, and finally restored him to consciousness.

Then the father confronted him, quiet, but with an iron determination.

"Where is my daughter?" was his demand.

"Oh, Mr. Maynard!" cried Charley, endeavoring to rise and seize the judge's hand, as soon as he realized the situation once more. "Are you not mad to suspect me of such villainy as the abduction of your daughter, whom I love as tenderly as you can? It is the warning I gave you. This is the work of the fellow who calls himself Sarpent Sam. I have every reason to believe that he is indeed the Navajo Nate who threatened you for sentencing him to the gallows, and who is said to have escaped with his life, and to have avenged himself on the others concerned."

Judge Maynard passed over all but what he believed to be a slip of the tongue.

"Why didn't you fetch the warning yourself, instead of sending it by that boy?"

"Can you ask? I did not wish you to know that I was anywhere in this vicinity."

"Naturally!" returned the judge, grimly.

"You did send that message, then?"

"Yes."

"Written in a disguised hand?"

"Yes."

"You are a very subtle liar, sir. I don't quite see why you are making this confession;

but, not to delay over details, I repeat my demand: What have you done with my daughter?"

"But, my dear sir, can't you see that I have done nothing with her? I am as anxious to find out what has become of her as you are. But I fear it is too late now. How long have I lain here unconscious?"

"That is of no importance, sir. Will you speak?"

"But I cannot. Will you listen to me? Will you believe me? By all that I hold sacred, I assure you that I am speaking the truth. If you refuse me credence, your obstinacy may result in the very calamity I would give my life to avert."

"Curse you!" cried the anguished father. "I will tear the heart out of your body, but I will have your secret! You are delaying me here with talk while your confederates are carrying my child further and further away from me!"

"Sir! sir! I adjure you! Where is Hugh Dunn? Fetch him here. I will try to convince him. You are beside yourself with grief, and—"

"Peace, you villain! Were you not fleeing us, straining every effort to escape, but for the intervention of Providence to stay your rascality?"

"I was going to intercept Sarpent Sam. Oh, if you will listen to me, and send a party to search Rattlesnake Ridge, there may be some hope of recovering her before he has destroyed all hope forever."

The judge was growing more and more frantic. It would not take long before, in his pain, he might lay violent hands on the man who, he believed, had wronged him so deeply.

But Hugh Dunn, though not in sight, was within the sound of Charley's voice.

"Farnham," he said, abruptly, "will you ask the judge to step outside here? Do not mention my name, if you please."

Farnham did as requested and Judge Maynard came out of the shanty.

"My dear sir," said Dunn, in that quiet tone of self-possession which gives weight, "to-day you were willing to be guided by my judgment. I ask leave now to make a suggestion. We have Mr. Kenyon in security here, so that he can do no further mischief. What then prevents us from testing the truth of what he says? If it should be true, after all, we are losing valuable time."

Harassed by fears whichever way he turned, the agonized father was glad to rest in the judgment of some one not so nearly concerned as he.

"Let it be so," he said. "It is the only thing left us."

Nothing was said to Charley as to the acquiescence in his suggestion. He was left in suspense. Tied hand and foot, he lay in a bunk, in the inner room of a shanty consisting of two apartments. The communicating door stood open, and in the outer room his guards were stationed.

It was not long before they beguiled the tedium of their watch by playing cards, and drinking and smoking.

Racked by agonizing thoughts, the lover lay chafing at his helplessness. He cared nothing for the conversation he overheard, which intimated that there was a very strong sentiment being agitated in favor of lynching him.

The fact was that the instincts of the man-hunter had been roused by the chase, and there were violent men in plenty only too ready to imbibe Judge Maynard's feeling of exasperation.

But Charley's one thought was the peril of the woman he loved. If he could get free, he might yet go in quest of her, where alone, he believed, she could be found, if found at all.

An hour passed, when he heard a sound not coming from the room where his guards were gambling.

A slight rattling, or flapping sound, drew his eye toward the fire-place, which took up almost the whole gable end of the shanty, and was in half-illumination from the light in the outer room.

He saw the end of a rope dangling down the huge chimney, amply large to admit the passage of a man's body.

"The lynchers!" flashed through him like an electric shock.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TURN OF THE TIDE.

BUT then came the thought:

"Suppose it should be a friend?"

What friend could resort to so crazy a means of effecting his release? There was not one chance in a hundred of success. It must be a

brain utterly desperate, or else not very mature, that would conceive such a plan. It was more likely the scheme of a romantic boy than anything else.

And where was there such a boy, if not Sassy Sol? Suppose it should prove to be he? What more likely than that, by so wild an adventure, he should try to gain prestige in the eyes of the man who had won his admiration by braving the rattlers of Sarpent Sam?

This consideration was enough to keep Charley from giving the alarm to his guards, till he was sure of the issue.

Some one was certainly descending the rope. He could tell by the wriggling of it. But what was his amazement when the body, not of Sassy Sol, but of Black Bess, came into view!

Without a sound the girl tip-toed to him, and cut his bonds. Without a sound he rose, and made his way up the rope, to where he found it made fast to the limb of a huge tree overhanging the shanty. The girl followed, hand over hand. Then together they descended to the ground at the back of the shanty, and made off into the darkness.

"Miss Champney," said Charley, when they were quite clear of the camp, "I have to thank you for my release. But, may I ask, where are you taking me to?"

"No further than this," the girl replied. "We part here. My object is accomplished. You are free."

"I beg your pardon," answered Charley, laying hold of her wrist, "I shall be obliged to detain you."

"Detain me!"

"Till I regain possession of Miss Maynard."

"Ah!"

It was a cry of rage and despair; and the girl gave a leap that might have released her from the grasp of any one but Cheeky Charley.

The next instant he had caught her free wrist, and taken a knife from her hand, which but for his quickness might have been buried in his body.

Almost in the same movement he threw his arm about her waist, and deprived her of her revolver.

The girl disdained to struggle after that. She uttered not a sound, but resigned herself to her fate.

"It is with the deepest regret that I repay you in this way," he went on; "but I have no other recourse. When I regain possession of the lady you inveigled from her friends, I shall set you free. Please to consider that, not this, as my requital of your service."

And, with the very rope she had used to rescue him, he bound her hands behind her back, and made her his prisoner.

She had provided two horses; and on these he once more took up his course for Rattlesnake Ridge.

They had not proceeded very far, however, when up from the midst of a bush at the roadside, like a living Jack-in-the-box, popped the body—naked as far as it could be seen—of the irrepressible Sassy Sol. But, whatever the fortunes of war, never was there a cheerier face than that with which Sassy Sol looked forth upon Cheeky Charley, leading Black Bess a prisoner.

"Waal, I sw'ar!" he declared, "this hyar's good enough!"

"Is that you, Sol?" cried Charley, pulling up at sight of his friend and admirer.

"Bet yer sweet life it's me!" returned Sol.

"But, it's a heap more'n me. Say! how'll you trade gals? I've got one what you'll like a heap better'n that'n."

"What's that you say?" exclaimed Charley, his heart beginning to leap.

"I say I've got a gal—a live gal, all alone by myself; an' the puttiest one you ever see in yer life. Ef you don't want to trade, say so, an' I'll dicker with the old gov'nor."

"Sol, for heaven's sake—"

But, Charley could get no further. He was choking with emotion.

"Come right along," said Sol. "I've got the one as'll suit you. Didn't I see his nibs hangin' around that thar camp, last night? Oh, you can't git away with yer uncle! My eye, ef I had your chance!"

"Sol, you have found her?—you have found her?"

"Bet yer boots! Come right along, Tommy! Never mind that thar piece o' drygoods. I'll take her off yer hands. Hello, miss! I never was chief-cook an' bottle-washer of such a concern as you be. I'd think you mighty scrumptious, ef it wasn't fur—"

But, having leaped from his horse, dropping the tether by which he held his prisoner, Charley Kenyon seized Sassy Sol by the shoulder, and

snatching from his hand the rope he had picked up, commanded:

"Where is she? Lead me to her at once!"

Sol had seldom made much quicker time than he did over the ground between the road and where he brought Charley Kenyon into the presence of the girl for whom his very soul was famishing.

Taking advantage of her release, Black Bess spurred her horse into a run, and dashed along the road with the rope dangling after her, at the risk of being jerked from the saddle by its catching on some obstruction, while she writhed and twisted till she freed her now lacerated wrists from their bondage.

But, her late captor cared nothing for her. He held his own true love in his arms, while Sassy Sol stood looking on, and ejaculating:

"My eye! my eye! my eye! it's a heap better'n a play!"

Returning from his race with Messrs. Farmingham, Nesbit & Co., as he laughingly designated the party from which he had effected his escape, Sassy Sol chanced upon Serpent Sam, and "had the gall" to track him to the hut into which Black Bess had inveigled Mellie Maynard.

When Bess and her father left their prisoner in temporary security, as they supposed, Sol took it upon himself to reconnoiter the hut, and see what they might have there.

What was his surprise and gratification to find poor Mellie, almost dead with terror.

He released her at once, of course; but then came the reaction. She had borne up against the fiendish malice of Bess and the brutal devilishness of Serpent Sam; but now, when she stood on her feet, her head swam, and she sunk fainting into Sol's outstretched arms.

"Waal, hyar's a go!" had been his reflection.

Then he had actually taken the swooning girl on his back, and attempted to carry her to Seaver City.

The release of the prisoner was not discovered by Black Bess, because, believing Charley Kenyon in danger from the mob, she had staid in Seaver City, watching her chance to release him; nor by Serpent Sam, since, disgusted with his daughter's abandonment of his service for her own, he cared nothing for her interests, and would have left Mellie to die of starvation before he turned out of his way on her account.

But now she lay secure in her lover's arms, wholly unconscious after one faint utterance of his name. He never let her out of them till, bearing her boldly back to the sorrowing camp, he placed her in her mother's embrace.

Sassy Sol was supplied with a new shirt, which fitted him quite as well as his own and sent on horseback in quest of the father.

When Judge Maynard went to his daughter's bedside, he found Charley Kenyon kneeling there, his hands fast locked in the clasp of the sleeping girl. Every once in a while she would start into wakefulness, with cries of terror, and was not to be soothed by anybody but her lover.

At sight of her father, she threw her arms about Charley's neck, and begged that he be not torn from her.

Touched by this evidence of her love, and finally made to understand that Charley had come into that country and risked his own life in order to shield him from Serpent Sam's vengeance, Judge Maynard's heart relented; and he flooded two lives with sunshine by withdrawing his opposition to their union.

Nollie Framingham and Hartley Nesbit had their "noses out of joint," of course; but they behaved very handsomely about it. Hugh Dunn found an appreciative place in the regard of several who before had been rather indifferent to him. The young ladies, dissembling their real timidity, declared that they would have adventures of their own in that delightful country; but they were secretly glad that it was decided to set out at once for San Francisco.

Serpent Sam and Black Bess disappeared from that section, and Rattlesnake Ridge promised to pass into nothing more than a legend.

Sassy Sol was "fixed for life." Charley Kenyon took charge of him, with a promise of giving him a better start in life than he was likely to get at Seaver City or Seven-up.

Finally, as, side by side, Charley Kenyon and Mellie Maynard rode out of Seaver City, some one in the crowd yelled:

"Three cheers for Cheeky Charley! Raise 'er boys! Hip! hip!"

THE END.

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